

PRICE 5 CENTS

OLD SLEUTH WEEKLY

No. 150

Price 5 cents.

THE BLUE STILETTO



OF A SUDDEN THERE SOUNDED THE
RUSH OF HOOF-BEATS AND
THE CARRIAGE WAS SURROUNDED BY A
SCORE OF MASKED MEN.

by
**"OLD
SLEUTH"**

The
ARTHUR WESTBROOK
Company
CLEVELAND
U.S.A.



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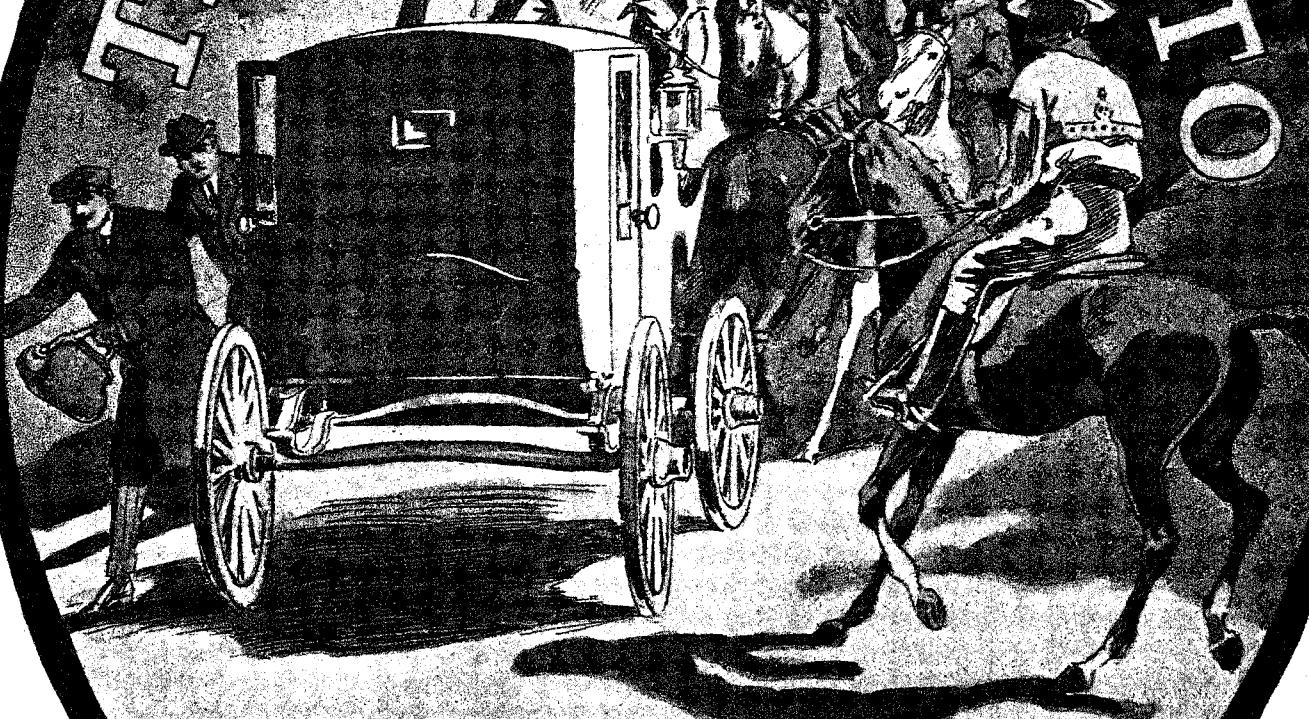


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OLD SLEUTH WEEKLY

A Series of

THE MOST THRILLING DETECTIVE STORIES EVER PUBLISHED

No. 150

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VOL. III

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THE BLUE STILETTO *or* TRAILING THE RED QUEEN

BY OLD SLEUTH

CHARACTERS.

TOMASSO BARZEFF—Member of the Society of the Blue Stiletto, who receives a commission from the Red Queen to assassinate the Czar of all the Russias. After being captured by the great detective, Inspector Pietro, he escapes from some English agents but, after the suicide of his Queen, takes his own life.

OLGA—Russian girl who lures the chief of the British secret agents to his death, then flees from New York in men's clothes and is trailed by the famous inspector and returned to America to pay the penalty of her crime.

FRANK STEBBINS—Rich but misguided young man who wishes to marry Olga and, in order to prove himself worthy of being made a member of the inner circle, kills the British secret agent.

ALEXIS AND SERGIUS—Assistants of Barzeff and Olga, who are captured aboard ship by Pietro.

HASTINGS COURtenay—Chief of British secret agents, who

is commissioned to capture Barzeff before the latter can perform the assassination and is lured to his death by Olga.

NATALIA—Tool of the Red Queen, who hypnotizes the great detective and almost accomplishes his capture.

THE RED QUEEN—Head of the Society of the Blue Stiletto, who has defied the secret agents of Europe for years and dies by her own hand when captured by the famous inspector.

GUISSEPPE—Assistant of the great detective.

INSPECTOR PIETRO—The terror of all Black Hand and avenging societies, who receives a startling call telling him that a person is being murdered and passes through many nerve-racking adventures before he captures the Red Queen.

AMBASSADORS, CONSULS-GENERAL, SECRET AGENTS, CHILDREN, SOLDIERS.

CHAPTER I.

THE STARTLING TELEPHONE CALL.

"I'm being k-kil—"

Abruptly the startling declaration ceased!

For several seconds there was silence—then, through the telephone receiver which an inspector in the New York detective headquarters was holding to his ear, there came an agonized shriek—a veritable wail of death and all grew still again!

"Here, Guiseppe, take this receiver—and listen!" cried the man who had heard the terrible words.

And waiting only until the detective he had sum-up! Now, hurry!"

moned took the instrument and placed it to his ear, the other sprang from his desk and rushed to another telephone.

"Give me the central from which that call came to me!" he commanded of the officer at the headquarters' switchboard.

Quickly was the connection given, and the official exclaimed, excitedly:

"This is Inspector Pietro, Central. I want the house number on that call which just came for me! Yes, you can tell, too! My receiver has not been hung up! Now, hurry!"

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To the man who had heard that agonized shriek, it seemed that minutes passed before the operator spoke again—but in reality it was only a few seconds.

"Yes, yes, I'm listening!" he cried, impatiently. "What? From the Bronx? 18 Horace Avenue? Under whose name is it listed? Tomasso Barzeff? How long has the 'phone been in the house? What? All right. Find out as soon as you can and call me. Thank you." And hanging up his receiver, the inspector went back to his assistant.

"Hear anything more?" he asked, anxiously.

"No—yes! It sounds like footsteps! I—"

But Inspector Pietro did not wait to hear more, snatching the receiver from Guiseppe's ear and placing it to his own.

And as he held it there, leaning forward and pressing it tight, as though by doing so he would get the closer to the scene of the mysterious crime, he heard the bold tread of many feet, then the sound as of hammering, followed by the dragging of some heavy object across the floor!

"Get the Bronx station, Guiseppe, and tell the officer in charge to rush a squad of men over to 18 Horace Avenue to surround the house." Tell them to capture any one leaving the premises but not to enter the house under any conditions until I get there!"

All the while the inspector had been talking, he had kept the receiver to his ear but the silence on the wire was the silence of the tomb and, after waiting for five minutes more, he set the instrument down just in time to receive the call from the operator whom he had requested to ascertain when the telephone had been installed in the house.

"Only two weeks and you've had instructions to remove it to-day?" he repeated. "Well, don't send any one there until you hear from me again!" Then, turning to his assistant, he ordered him to call a private automobile and began to remove his uniform, donning citizens clothes.

The machine was in waiting when this change had been made and, after briefly acquainting his superior with the few but startling facts he had learned, the famous inspector called to his assistant and together they left headquarters and were soon whirling in defiance of all speed laws toward the scene of what was to prove one of the most baffling of the many blind crimes committed in the great metropolis.

On the way, he told Guiseppe about the interrupted alarm and the information the operator at the telephone exchange had given him.

"Tomasso Barzeff, what a name!" exclaimed the assistant.

"Exactly—what a name. It is a combination of Italian and Russian. There never was a man from Italy who bore the name Barzeff, nor from Russia who

was christened Tomasso. The question is, which is the alias, Tomasso or Barzeff?"

And before the great inspector, who was the terror of all Black Hand and other secret avenging and blackmailing societies, learned the answer, he was destined to a chase that took him to foreign lands!

CHAPTER II.

THE BLUE STILETTO.

Horace avenue proved to be one of the streets on the outskirts of the Bronx.

Past two houses, evidently, the homes of laborers, the machine sped with the famous inspector and his assistant and then covered fully an eighth of a mile before a glimpse of blue-coated men told them the two story wooden dwelling which the police were surrounding must be their destination.

"What a place for such a crime," murmured Guiseppe. "Absolutely isolated and with practically no traffic along the avenue."

Pietro made no response, though the deep lines that appeared on his face showed that he agreed with his aide and realized the difficulty that confronted him.

"What are you trying to do to us, make us out for monkeys?" demanded the lieutenant in charge of the squad of officers from the station in the Bronx, striding to the machine as it stopped in front of the house. "That place hasn't been occupied for months. Look at the shutters at the windows—and there isn't a sign of a footprint or wagon track leading to or from it."

Deserted, indeed, did the house appear and the lieutenant was giving vent to more of his feelings when Pietro cut him short.

"The looks of that house just goes to show that it's never safe to judge by appearances, Barney. I received a telephone message from it within an hour!" he declared.

"Telephone message from *this* house?" repeated the lieutenant, in amazement. "You must be crazy! Why, look around, man. There isn't even so much as wire to be seen running from these poles to it!"

At the words, the famous inspector raised his eyes to the strands of wire which were strung along the avenue, then suddenly they snapped and he replied:

"You're wrong, there, Barney! See that strand

hanging down? It means that wires *did* run to the house up to a short time ago *and that they've been cut down!*"

Quickly glancing toward the pole nearest the house, the lieutenant beheld a piece of wire about three feet long, dangling beside the post—and he flushed as he realized the keenness of the inspector in noting details which utterly escaped him.

But his chagrin was quickly forgotten in the actions of Pietro.

Bidding the chauffeur wait, the inspector jumped from the machine and walked toward the house.

Approaching the front door, which was fastened with a stout padlock, he carefully surveyed the wooden steps, then suddenly dropped to his knees.

In the dust which covered the top of the step was the imprint of a rubber heel!

"That shows why you couldn't find any tracks about the house, Barney," Pietro exclaimed, excitedly. "The men wore 'sneakers'!"

Leaving the policemen to marvel at his quickness of eyesight, the inspector went round to the back of the house where he found another door, also padlocked. No marks, however, did he discover and returning to the front, commanded several of the officers to pry out the staples which held the padlock.

To do this was only the work of a few minutes and, as the door swung in, Pietro entered, his assistant and the lieutenant at his heels.

And the sight which met their eyes was in striking contrast to the abandoned appearance of the exterior of the house!

A costly rug covered the floor, chairs, a davenport, a table and a desk, all of expensive design, stood about and the walls were hung with etchings and prints which showed their purchaser to be of artistic appreciation.

Striding hurriedly to the desk, the inspector pried it open—only to find it as bare as the clapboards on the house!

The next room proved to be the dining room, furnished as comfortably as the other. The kitchen revealed no evidence of disturbance and the officers mounted the stairs.

Three doors were visible from the hallway and, choosing the first, Pietro threw it open, uttering a cry of amazement as he caught a glimpse of the interior!

On the floor in front of the bed was a pool of blood—and in its center stood a blue stiletto!

CHAPTER III.

PIETRO MAKES SOME DISCOVERIES.

"That weapon proves it to be a crime of vengeance—but for what remains for me to learn!" exclaimed

the inspector as, entering the room, he approached the grim emblem and drew it from its awful setting.

A moment's examination told him the stiletto was of the finest workmanship, so thin that it would leave scarcely a mark to show its insertion yet so sharp and strong that it would penetrate to the curiously wrought hilt.

But only a few seconds did Pietro gaze at the death dealing object, then turned to examine the room.

On a stand close by the head of the bed, which had been hidden behind the door, stood a telephone, with the receiver hanging down almost to the floor and not two feet away from the pool of blood.

"Probably the victim's head was near the instrument which accounts for my hearing his death shriek," muttered the inspector, as much to himself as to his companions. "It's up to us now to find how the body was removed—as well as any evidence against the murderers. Get busy, men."

The bed bore traces of having been recently occupied and, turning back the covers, the famous detective disclosed to view a paper covered book.

Eagerly picking it up, he was amazed to find it to be a French detective story.

Putting it in his pocket, together with the blue stiletto, Pietro devoted himself to removing the bedclothes, taking off the mattress and searching all through the room without finding anything to assist him even among the wearing apparel which lay on a chair and hung in the closets.

"Whoever committed this crime must have taken a lot of trouble to remove all marks that could possibly lead to identification," declared Guiseppe, as he discovered that even the tailor's name on the clothes, evidently of foreign build and material, were missing.

"Or else the victim himself took the precaution," commented the inspector, significantly.

"Then you've formed a theory already?" asked the lieutenant, who, with the other members of the police and detective forces of the city, held Pietro in awe.

"A theory, yes. But nothing more and in order to substantiate it, I've got to have some facts. Let's try the next door."

Willingly the others followed—and gasps of amazement came from them at the sight revealed by the next room!

Everything in it, from the arrangement of the bed to the photographs on the wall, bespoke it as being the chamber of a woman!

Directing his companions to examine the clothes in the closet carefully, the famous inspector went to the bureau and, opening one drawer after another, searched the contents carefully. But when he had ransacked the last one he was not satisfied. The dressing table

seemed to contain more space than was accounted for by the drawers!

Again he opened one after another and shut them—to open the middle one a third time, pull it out and set it on the floor.

Eagerly his assistant and the lieutenant watched him, pausing in their own work and, as they beheld him suddenly raise his foot and stamp with all his weight on the bottom, they strode to him.

"I was right!" he exclaimed. "See, it has a false bottom." And dropping to his knees, he wrenched the pieces of wood apart.

But all that greeted his eyes was a bit of paper!

Picking it up, he scanned it with none the less interest, then raised it to his nose and smelled of it!

"Get some water, Guiseppe!" he commanded, excitedly. "This is a piece of trick paper—and it is big enough to contain quite a few words!"

Quickly his assistant left the room in search of the bath, which he found behind the third door, and returned with a tumbler full of water.

Taking it, Pietro poured just a few drops on one corner of the paper, for he was not sure that a chemical which would respond to the reaction of water had been used—and he did not wish to destroy the scrap should it prove ineffective.

To his delight, however, beneath the water there appeared the deep blue forms of several letters—and hastily he saturated the rest of the piece.

As word after word became visible, the inspector studied them eagerly.

"It's written in Russian!" he cried, excitedly. "Which proves that the occupant of this room, at least, was of that nationality. This fact, combined with the other that the telephone was rented under the name of Tomasso Barzeff would seem to indicate that it is the Tomasso that is the alias and that the people with whom we have to deal are from the land of the Czar."

Being the master of several languages, even as he spoke, Pietro was translating the words.

"Well?" exclaimed the lieutenant, when several minutes had brought nothing more from the inspector.

"There's not much here—in fact there is only enough to be aggravating," returned Pietro. "It says 'delay too long' then there are words missing: 'the offer only holds good three days more,' another break: 'you say he loves you, so he can't suspect you,' and then 'red queen.'"

"Huh, if you can make head or tail out of that—and land anybody for the crime from it—I'll sure take off my hat to you, Pietro. It sounds to me as though it were only a piece from a spoony letter."

Realizing that this opinion was probably only vouchsafed in order to draw his own out, the inspector

merely smiled, put the paper in his pocket and began to scrutinize the photographs on the wall.

To his eyes, skilled in the characteristics of the features of various nationalities, all were French save two, the head of a distinguished looking Englishman and a weak faced American boy.

Carefully removing the two latter, Pietro left the others in their rack and upon the dressing table for he was convinced that they were the photographs of actors and opera singers.

In the bathroom, nothing of interest was found and the inspector turned to still another door, invisible from the stairs, which he soon found led to the attic.

Striking a match, he examined the stairway carefully, discovered no trace of footsteps, and mounted into the loft which was absolutely empty.

"It beats all, inspector, how quick the devils cleared out!" exclaimed the lieutenant, as they descended to the first floor. "We were here within half an hour after we got your orders but the 'phone wire had been cut and the whole crowd vamoosed with their duds."

"They were probably already to move out at a moment's notice, Barney. But they may want their clothes, so you'll leave half a dozen men here, hidden about the house outside, to arrest any one who comes near it. Tell the men to stay here until I return."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

Having delivered these instructions to the police official, the famous inspector opened the front door and went out to his waiting automobile.

"Shall I stay here myself, Pietro?" asked Barney, as the chauffeur was cranking up.

"Yes, if you like. As soon as I'm gone, put the padlock back on the door and then take the men you keep with you to that clump of trees across the road. You'll be able to see anybody trying to approach the house, either in back or front, from there and you'll have plenty of time to run up on them."

"Now, don't go off half-cocked. Unless I'm mightily mistaken, we're up against a big international game in this murder, so the people you'll have to do with won't be just ordinary murderers. Therefore, if you should see some one coming along the road,

whether from North or South, don't run out and show yourselves—wait until you see them enter the house, then creep up on them!"

The words of the famous inspector filled the lieutenant with amazement, and he promised faithfully to be circumspect in all his actions, adding:

"How soon will you be back? It won't do any good to watch after dusk if the ginks are so all-fired clever."

"Oh, I shan't be gone for more than a few hours. Now watch out. Go ahead, Mr. Driver."

With a snort, the powerful machine leaped forward and was soon out of sight of the house of mystery. When it was opposite the two dwellings at the head of the avenue, Pietro gave the word to stop and, getting out, walked rapidly to the side door of the nearest one.

"Can you tell me if any one lives in the house down below here a little way?" he asked of the woman who opened the door a few inches in response to his summons.

"I don't know nothin' about it!" she snapped, at the same time trying to shut the door.

But the inspector was accustomed to dealing with people of her suspicious sort who were unwilling to give information and, anticipating just such a move, he thrust his foot in the opening in time to prevent its being closed.

For a moment, the woman struggled to shut the door, then called:

"Jenny, get the gun!" Then, addressing Pietro, she continued: "If you don't take your foot away I'll fill you full of holes! Now, clear out, 'cause I don't want no trouble! But there ain't no man can come into my house without my sayin' so!"

"Don't get excited, madam, I'm not going to harm you. I just want to ask you a few questions about—"

"But I tell you, I don't know nothin'!"

So emphatic was the creature, however, that Pietro believed she would really be able to give him some information in regard to the occupants of number 18—and whether it would prove of great value or not, it would at least be better than the total ignorance under which he was laboring.

"Oh, yes, you do know something, too!" he protested. "I'm an inspector from police headquarters and if you don't wish to get into serious trouble, I advise you to tell me all you can."

"How do I know you be an officer and not one of them fellers from down below?" demanded the woman, suspiciously.

"This badge ought to convince you?" returned the inspector, throwing open his coat and disclosing his detective's star, as he spoke.

Closely the stubborn householder eyed the emblem, then finally opened the door.

"Well, come in—an' be quick about it," she snapped. "What is it you want to know?"

The room which he entered was used as a combination kitchen, dining and bedroom and as Pietro made his way to a chair, he was conscious of many eyes peeping at him from various places of concealment.

"Come out, childers, it's all right!" announced the woman—and immediately, four youngsters, varying in age from perhaps three to ten, trooped from behind boxes and out of closets, gathering about their mother, clinging to her chair and dress.

"How long has the house at number 18 been occupied?" asked the inspector, when the children had become fairly quiet.

"I didn't say it was!"

"Oh, yes you did—when you said you didn't know but I was one of them," smiled Pietro.

"Off an' on for a year, I guess."

"How many are there of them?"

"That sure is more than I can tell you—seems like 'twas a different one every time I see anybody."

"I seen four an' a ledgy, Ma," announced the oldest boy. "I know, 'cause I counted 'em."

"That's the boy," exclaimed the inspector, enthusiastically and, reaching into his pocket, he drew forth a quarter. "Now let's see if you can't tell me something more about them. Were they young or old?"

"One on 'em was young, real young, an' the ledgy was young but the rest was as old as you be."

Smiling at this statement, Pietro produced the photograph of the weak looking American boy he had taken down from the wall of the woman's room in the house of mystery and showed it to the little chap.

"Did he look anything like that?" he asked.

"Sure, that's him!"

"When did you see him last?"

"Yesterday."

"About what time, morning or afternoon?"

"Afternoon. He come walking up the road carryin' a grip."

"Did he live there regularly?"

With the eagerness of people of her class to take a hand in giving information, now that the barrier of reserve had been beaten down, the woman declared:

"Keep quiet, Jimmy, an' let your Ma do the talkin'."

Then turning again to the inspector, she said: "I told you there didn't none of 'em live there regularly."

But Jimmy, with the quarter shining before his eyes, was not to be silenced.

"The ledgy an' the ol'est was generally there, Ma!"

"What did the others look like?"

"They was all furriners—an' there warn't none but the young American lad I'd cared to meet after dark, not exceptin' the young leddy!" declared the mother.

"Why, what did they do or how did they act that they made you afraid of them?"

"Whenever they passed up the road, they was allus alookin' back an' all roun' 'em, though they expected some one was after 'em or would jump out on 'em. I allus told my man, Pete, they was up to suthin'," and then becoming very confidential, she leaned forward and whispered "*I said they was counterfeiters!*"

Though this idea did not coincide with the theory the famous inspector had formed, he nevertheless realized that it might be entirely within the realms of possibility and asked:

"What makes you think so? Did you ever hear any sounds that might be stamping or printing machines?"

"Only this mornin'."

"This morning? At what time?" demanded Pietro.

"About an hour afore I seen you go by in your auti."

As he remembered the sounds as of hammering that he had heard through the telephone receiver almost directly after the interrupted alarm, the inspector wondered if they could be the noises to which the woman referred—and if they were, he realized that she had probably heard the death wail.

"Is that all you heard?" he fairly snapped, fixing his eyes upon her with a look that made her shrink back.

A moment, she hesitated, then replied, in a low voice:

"Yes!"

"That's not so! You heard a cry—a piercing shriek!"

"Sure we did, Ma, an' you grabbed me by the hand an' started to run!" interposed Jimmy.

When the famous manhunter had declared the woman was not telling the truth, he had but been shooting at random. But when he received the amazing reply of the boy, he determined to take advantage of his seeming omniscience.

"There, you see, it doesn't do any good to try to conceal anything from me, madam," he said, sternly. "I knew that you had heard that cry—and your son proves it! Don't try to lie to me any more!"

"If you ran away upon hearing the cry, how could you hear the hammering?"

"Cause we stopped after there warn't no more than one yell an' sneaked back an' listened!"

"What else did you hear?"

"Nothin'—I'll swear to it on a pack of bibles!"

"Is that true, Jimmy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you leave the house until you had found out the cause of the scream and the pounding?"

"I was jus' agoin' to knock on the door when along come two men an' while one of 'em climbed the telephone pole, the other come up an' asked what we was doin' there."

"Go on," directed the inspector as the woman paused.

"I told him about the cry and the hammerin' an' he said I mus' be crazy, that he thought I was lyin' an' that I was intendin' to break into the house an' that I'd better clear out afore he had the law on me!"

"And of course you left then?"

"You betcher life—they ain't no one goin' to have the law on me nor any of mine."

"How were the men dressed?"

"They wore suits like 'phone workers."

"Looked like foreigners, didn't they?"

"How'd you know?" exclaimed the woman, in surprise.

"Never mind. Did you stay in the road to see what the man on the pole was doing?"

"I seen him acuttin' wires when I passed—but I didn't bother none. I was too mad!"

"Did they pass your house when they finished?"

"No."

"I seen 'em goin' inter the back door!" declared Jimmy.

"Then you didn't come away with your mother?"

"Uhuh. But after she come in, I sneaked out an' went up to the turn in the road an' piped 'em off."

"When did they come out?"

"*They didn't come out!*"

CHAPTER V.

DARING WORK.

This amazing reply brought the famous inspector to his feet!

"They didn't come out?" he repeated, as though he had not heard aright. "Are you sure? They might have gone while the policemen were surrounding the house!"

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Well did Pietro know that such an occurrence would have been impossible without the fugitives being seen by the bluecoats yet he hoped it might cause the lad confusion and embarrassment if he had been drawing on his imagination for the sake of the quarter—but the boy's next words were convincing.

"Course I'm sure! Didn't I trail after the cops an' stand in the brush while they was agittin' out of the patrol? I expected to see 'em nab the peoples when they came out of the house an' I wanted to find out who'd done the yellin'—but I didn't see a man nor no one leave the place."

This answer suggested but one solution to the mystery of the inmates' disappearance to the inspector and eager to put his idea to the test, he started toward the door, then paused.

"There's one more thing I want to know—did the people always keep the shutters up at the windows when they were at home as well as when away?"

"They sure did!" asserted the woman. "That's what makes me think they was counterfeiters."

Putting his hand into his pocket, Pietro drew out more coins which he gave to Jimmy and the other children, cautioned them not to talk about his questioning them and took his departure.

Hastening to his machine, the inspector was on the point of entering, when he suddenly turned and walked over to the next house. Upon his approach, he could see the faces of children pressed against the windows but when he rapped on the door no one answered.

Impatiently he beat twice again with his hand yet with no better result. And finally, he called out:

"If you don't let me in, I'll break down the door! I know there's some one inside because I saw you at the windows!"

There sounded a patter of feet in response to his announcement, then a very shaky voice exclaimed:

"What do you want?"

"To come in and talk to you."

"Our Mammy ain't here an' she don't let us open the door to no strangers," returned the voice.

"Then come out here—I'm not going to hurt you," declared Pietro.

Well did he know that the children had seen him enter and leave the house of their neighbor and he hoped that curiosity might lead them to learn the cause. Sure enough, after a wait, the door was opened and out came two girls who appeared to be between eight and twelve.

"Do you know the people who live in that house a little way down the road?" he asked.

"You mean Miss Olga? Sure, she's give me candy lots of times," announced the younger.

At the name, a smile flashed over the face of the great detective and he asked eagerly:

"What does she look like?"

"Oh, she's the most beautifulst leddy I ever seen!" exclaimed the child, emphatically.

"Dark or light?"

"Dark—and with oh, such black eyes an' hair!"

"How do you know her name was Olga?"

"Because I heered Mister Frank call her that."

"And who is Mister Frank?"

"He's the man who wanted to marry her!" interposed the elder girl, jealous that her sister was having all the honor of talking with the stranger who rode in an automobile.

"How do you know that?"

"Cause I've heerd him ax her, oh lots an' lots of times!"

Realizing from the tone of her voice and the expression on her face that the child was beginning to draw on her imagination, the inspector turned the subject, asking:

"When did you see Miss Olga last?"

"Yesterday afternoon—just before Mister Frank went up the road," answered the elder.

"Mr. Frank looked like this, didn't he?" and again Pietro produced the photograph of the American from his pocket.

"Uhuh! That's him!" cried both girls, together.

"Have you ever seen the other people who live there?"

"Oh, Miss Olga's father," returned the younger.

"What did he look like?"

"He was old an' fierce an' drove me away from the house one day when I went there."

"Do you know his name?"

"No, sir. That is, I can't repeat it, it was some furrin soundin' word."

"Did you ever see more than four people at the house, that is, besides Miss Olga?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know what they did for a living?"

"No, sir, but Mammy an' Mis' Wilts, nex' door, allus said—"

But a nudge in the ribs by her sister silenced the child.

"Go on, what did they say?"

"Now, Mamie, you keep your mouth shut!" admonished the elder girl.

"No, you tell me," returned the inspector, sternly.

"They said they was counterfeiters!"

"You said you've heard Mr. Frank ask Miss Olga to

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"marry him?" exclaimed Pietro, suddenly turning on the other child. "What did he say when he asked her?"

"He kept sayin' 'why don't you drop it an' come with me. You know I love you an' has plenty of money.'"

"And what did Miss Olga say?"

"She said she dasent, that her daddy would kill her. Then Mr. Frank would say 'It's time to have him taken care of.' An' then Miss Olga, she'd cry."

"Where were you during these conversations?"

"We was awalkin'."

"Where?"

"Oh, in the woods beyant the house."

"Was your sister with you?"

"No. Miss Olga said she had big ears."

"Now Mamie, you shut up!" snapped her sister, angrily.

But the great detective believed that the meaning of the remark was that she was old enough to understand more than her younger sister and he quickly said so, much to the elder's delight.

"Have you seen any of them this morning?"

"No. Say, what's all the cops doin' up here?"

"They're after the men at Miss Olga's." And as he made the statement, Pietro watched the faces of the children closely to note its effect.

"That's just what Mr. Frank said would happen!" asserted Mamie.

"How long have you children been going with Miss Olga and Mr. Frank?"

"Only since last week! Miss Olga was away for, oh, a long time an' before she went, she usen't to like to have us round."

"Did you ever see this man?" suddenly asked the inspector, drawing the photograph of the distinguished looking Englishman from his pocket and holding it out to them.

Closely both girls peered at it—but neither was able to recognize it.

"What did the other two men look like?"

"We never seen 'em, though Ma met 'em one night—an' they mos' scared her to death askin' her what she meant by followin' 'em!" declared the elder child.

"How long ago was that?"

"Oh, months."

"If your mother thought the people were counterfeitors, why didn't she report them to the authorities?"

"Cause Pap says we ain't agoin' to git mixed up with no Blackhanders!"

"What made him think they were members of the Black Hand society?"

"He said they was dagoes an' that if they was honest they wouldn't be livin' like they did with the shutters all up all the time."

Understanding well the fear the thought that their neighbors were members of the dread band would inspire, the great detective did not press the matter further and, after asking several more questions to which he received replies of no service, he gave the girls some money, then hurried out to his machine.

"Drive back to number 18 just as fast as you can," he commanded the chauffeur as he got in.

"Going back so soon?" exclaimed Guiseppe, in surprise. "You must have found out something worth while?"

"I certainly have. I've got part of the girl's name and partially identified the American." And as briefly as possible he gave his assistant all the facts he had gleaned.

"But I don't see what you're going back for?" protested the other.

"You will—before long."

But the time was shorter than even the famous inspector expected!

Bidding the chauffeur stop just before they got to the curve, the two detectives got out and, going into the bushes that lined the road, made their way to the spot where the lieutenant and his men were stationed, arriving just as the patrol wagon with all but six of the policemen was leaving the house.

Calling to Barney, Pietro instructed the men to surround the house a second time and as they did so, he rushed to the front door, yanked off the staples, and entered.

And as the manhunters stepped within, they heard a door slam!

"Just as I thought!" exclaimed Pietro, while his men looked at him in amazement. "There's an underground passage leading from the place! Quick—we may be able to catch the gang if we find it in time!"

Rushing into the living room, the great detective glanced about searchingly, comparing the appearance of the room with the picture he carried of it in his mind as he had first seen it—and to his delight, he noted that the desk had been shifted some four feet further to the South!

Going closely to the wall, he examined it closely for several minutes, then suddenly raised his foot and drove it with all his force against the wooden panels!

A moment, they quivered, then broke!

"Hurry, men! Take hold of these pieces and yank them out!" cried Pietro.

But no sooner had they disclosed an opening down which a flight of steps led than they jumped back in terror!

Below was a small light, flickering and sputtering! "Out of the house for your lives—it's a fuse on a bomb!" gasped the famous inspector.

CHAPTER VI.

PIETRO RECEIVES A WARNING.

No urging did the great detective's companions need to give haste to their flight and as they had never run before, they dashed from the house.

"Back! Away from the building!" shouted Pietro to the policemen who were on guard on the different sides.

Amazed at the spectacle presented by their superiors running as though for their lives, yet knowing full well that they were brave men and would not flee unless flight were absolutely necessary, the bluecoats took to their heels, joining their fellows as soon as possible.

"What's wrong?" they gasped, in chorus.

But the answer came in a muffled rumble—followed by the rending of the timbers and clapboards in the front side of the house!

"A bomb!" exclaimed one of the bluecoats.

"Exactly," smiled the great detective. "And a mighty close call it was for you two men and me," he continued, looking at his assistant and the lieutenant. "The fiends evidently returned to the house after our departure—indeed, I shouldn't be surprised if they had watched us from the secret door as we went out the front—and our coming back, in addition to being unexpected, told them that we had run across information of importance. Fearing what we might have learned, they determined to be rid of us once and for all—and if I hadn't happened to hear that door slam, they would have succeeded. As it is, they've not only failed to blow us into mince meat but have disclosed their means of entrance and egress from the house! *And before I'm through with them, they'll wish they had put one of their infernal machines under themselves!*"

Scarcely had the inspector finished speaking than there sounded another explosion and another—and in two places, less than a rod from where the officials were standing, the ground cracked!

"They're evidently determined to block the tunnel," exclaimed Pietro. "Instead, however, they've showed us its course."

"Barney, after I've examined the passageway I'll drive to the Bronx station and have more men sent to you with pickaxes, shovels and flambeaux—and I want you to dig till you find the end of the tunnel if it takes you a week!"

"You'll establish a patrol in the woods near where you were hiding when I came up, for I imagine the opening is not far from there. If any one approaches, challenge and then shoot! To tell the truth, however, I don't think any of the gang will venture back."

As he concluded his instructions, the great detective approached the wrecked house and, making an entrance through the twisted and torn boards, he peered into the mouth of the tunnel—but so well had the bomb done its work that only a mass of earth was visible.

"Let's go upstairs and see if the devils were after anything," Pietro suggested and quickly he mounted to the upper story where a glance into the room which had been the scene of death told him that all the wearing apparel had been removed.

"Too bad we didn't take some of it," the inspector declared. "I intended to when I came back later. It might have helped us in getting a line on the sort of a man who wore the clothes. Now let's look in the girl's room."

From there, also, the clothing had been taken, but the photographs still hung and stood in their places.

"Evidently this murder completed their business and they've decided to trek," commented the detective. "We can't do anything more here, so I'll go and try to pick up some of the other ends of the case."

"Mind you look sharp, Barney, in digging. There may be more buried bombs. When you come to the end of the tunnel, block it up. Keep a sharp lookout for a trunk or a box—you may find the body."

And returning to his machine, the famous inspector entered it and was soon whirling away to the police station where he ordered more men to be sent to the house, with tools, after which he was driven down town.

Arrived at headquarters, Pietro went to his office where he found an envelope lying on his desk.

Hastily opening it, he gasped as he read:

"Don't be a fool and meddle in business that is not your own! Every move you make is being watched and if you value your life, drop this case at once—or you'll fall a victim to the Blue Stiletto! The Red Queen never fails to strike when she says she will!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE CASE ASSUMES GREATER IMPORTANCE.

Smiling grimly as he folded the warning missive, the inspector pushed his button.

"This is going to be the one time when Her Majesty the Red Queen *doesn't* strike when she says she will—and when I come across her she will never strike again!" he muttered through clenched teeth. Then, as the orderly responded to his summons, he demanded: "When was this note delivered to me?"

"Note? What note?" exclaimed the subordinate, in amazement.

"This note that I'm holding in my hand, which I found on my desk when I came in," returned the famous detective, coldly.

"Why, there hasn't been anyone in your room since you went out, Inspector!" protested the orderly, staring at the envelope, blankly.

"Nonsense, man! Notes don't fly in at windows or come through ceilings! This was delivered by some person very much alive—and cunning, too, if he managed to get in here to my room without any one in this whole building knowing it! If you fellows don't watch out, some crook will come along and run off with you!"

And turning on his heel, the great detective went to the office of his chief to whom he showed the warning and reported his subordinate's declaration that no one had delivered it.

"Why not take the Queen's suggestion and let it drop, Pietro?" asked the chief, after reading the note. "So long as you don't even know the name of the man who's been done to death, it looks to me like a hopeless task to find it out. The gang is evidently some secret society of foreign cut-throats and, as the woman says, they've probably just been settling some little business of their own. As I don't believe they are people who amount to very much, it won't make any difference one way or the other whether the murderers are rounded-up or not."

"I'm inclined to disagree with you chief, that they are of no importance—but a threat never kept me from hunting down a gang of cut-throats or any secret society!" retorted the famous inspector. "At any rate, I should like to work on the case for forty-eight hours. If I don't turn up something definite in that time, I'll drop it."

"All right, go ahead—but don't run any foolish chances. You're too valuable!" smiled his superior and with a friendly nod, he dismissed the great detective.

But long before the expiration of the time limit

Pietro had set for himself, his chief was not only rejoiced that the fearless inspector had not given up the case but had placed unlimited funds at his disposal with instructions to stay on the trail if it took him to the ends of the earth!

The mysteriously delivered warning, however, caused a change in the inspector's plans. Though the threat that he was being followed had been made to him countless times, he had a feeling that in the band of the Red Queen he had encountered foemen who were not only fearless but cleverer than any of the criminals with whom he had had to deal in the past and, while he cared not for himself, he was unwilling to subject his subordinates to dangers until it was absolutely necessary. Accordingly, when he reached the automobile in which his assistant was awaiting him, he bade him drive to the Italian consul-general to learn if he knew anything about a Tomasso Barzeff, giving as an excuse for his not accompanying him that he wished to follow another clue.

Pausing to watch Giuseppe away from headquarters, Pietro re-entered the building and called for a taxicab, remaining inside until it arrived, when he hastily got into it.

"Drive to the Russian Consulate," he instructed the man on the box.

But not thirty feet from the steps of the police building had the machine proceeded when there sounded a sharp hiss—and something whirled through the open window, burying itself in the cushion just beyond his left arm!

Seizing it, the famous inspector drew it out—to find that he held a Blue Stiletto in his hand!

"The Red Queen is certainly trying to keep her word!" he exclaimed, grimly. "But it serves me right for not closing the window." And he remedied the neglect without delay.

The throwing of the death dealing weapon had not been unnoticed, however—for the street was too alive with newspaper men, policemen and detectives constantly coming and going—and a sudden shout of "Catch that man running up the street!" told him that the act had been seen and that the pursuit had been started. Yet he deemed it wiser for him to continue on his way than to join in the chase and in due course arrived at the consulate.

Well-known to the clerks and attendants, he was soon ushered into the private office of the Consul General.

"Hello, Pietro, what's up now?" that official exclaimed, as soon as they were alone.

"I don't know—exactly. Have you a man in your secret service called Tomasso Barzeff?"

As he uttered the unusual name, the famous in-

spector fancied that the Russian started just a bit, yet he could not be sure.

"That's a curious combination, Tomasso and Barzeff," commented the consul, evidently seeking to divert the great detective's mind from the question he had asked. "I should think you would be more likely to learn about him among your own Italian people."

"Oh, I'm doing that, never worry. But you haven't told me whether you ever heard of the name."

Shutting his eyes till they were little more than mere slits in his face, the Russian puffed at his cigarette for several minutes, then said:

"I should advise you to go to our Embassy at Washington. I can tell you nothing!"

Amazed at the manner of the consul fully as much as at his words, Pietro was on the point of asking an explanation when the Russian cut him short, saying:

"You must excuse me now, Inspector. I have some business which must be attended to right away. Let me suggest, however, that you—er—proceed with caution."

This last statement surprised the great detective even more than the former and, murmuring a formal good-bye, he passed from the private office into the public and then down the stairs.

"I wonder what in the world I'm sticking up against?" he exclaimed to himself. "It's very evident that the consul knows of this Tomasso Barzeff—and it's just as evident from his warning that he's either a person of some consequence or to be greatly feared."

For the moment, however, Pietro's thoughts were turned to another channel by his discovery, as he reached the foot of the stairs and looked through the doors, that his taxicab was nowhere in sight!

CHAPTER VIII.

BARZEFF IS IDENTIFIED.

For the moment, it occurred to the great detective that the chauffeur might have misunderstood him about waiting, then he remembered he had not paid him.

"Must be more of the Red Queen's agents' work!" he muttered to himself. "They certainly are keeping a close watch on me and no mistake. That fellow who tried to get me with the Blue Stiletto hasn't had time to get from Headquarters down here, even if he escaped from the mob that was chasing him, so they must have decided that I would visit the consul. That woman surely is clever."

As these thoughts flashed through the great detective's mind, he stood inside the doors of the building

and while he was debating whether to chance it on foot to the subway or to return to the consulate and phone for another cab, he suddenly caught sight of a head thrust forward from one side of the doors and peering within.

The face was undeniably Italian and of a viciousness that bespoke the man as one who would hesitate never a minute over plunging a stiletto into any one whom he might consider his victim.

But no sooner had the fearless inspector caught a glimpse of the evil visage than he leaped forward, his right hand in his pocket clutching the butt of his revolver!

As the doors swung open, the Italian sprang away, glancing over his shoulder to learn whether or not Pietro followed him and, when he found that the inspector was giving pursuit, he ran just fast enough to keep ahead of him, suddenly darting into an alley-way.

For the moment, the great detective thought of following, then it came to him that the fellow had been too deliberate in his running and that it was probably his purpose to lure him off the street and he stopped, whirled and hastened to retrace his steps, looking back every now and then—and on one of these occasions he beheld the face of the man he had been pursuing peering from the alley!

Congratulating himself that he had given up the chase just in time, Pietro quickened his pace and was soon in the subway station where he boarded a train and rode up town to Thirty-Fourth street, where he took a taxi and drove to the Pennsylvania station, arriving there just ten minutes before the departure of the Congressional Limited.

His ticket purchased, he hastened to a telephone booth and was soon in communication with headquarters where he learned that his assistant had not yet returned from his mission to the Italian consul and left word that when he did come in, he should telegraph him at the Brunswick Hotel, in code, the result of his inquiries in regard to the man with the amazing combination of names.

Entering the stateroom he had purchased—for he did not care to run the risk of meeting any more of the agents of the mysterious woman to whom he seemed to be so well known—he made himself comfortable and then began to put the pieces of information he had gleaned together.

Whether or not the young woman whom had told him was Olga, was the Red Queen he was unable to decide, yet the fragment of the invisible note he had found, bearing the signature "Red Queen," seemed to indicate that they were not one and the same. The weak-faced American, however, he readily believed was Frank. The old man who had scared the child away might be the mysterious Tomasso Barzeff and he was inclined to identify him as such.

The constant comings and goings of the inmates of the lonely house suggested to him that they were either away upon crimes and depredations or that they were secret agents of some government—and, in view of the Russian Consul's remarkable actions and words, this opinion became more and more fixed in his mind.

Granting that such were the case, he felt that either the Englishman or the American, both of whose photographs he had, must be the person referred to in the scrap of letter he had found. That murder had been committed—and that the victim, suddenly realizing the danger that threatened, had called him at police headquarters only to be struck down before he could give any details—the statements of the woman and Jimmy seemed to confirm. Yet the fact that of all the officials in the building, he should be singled out puzzled him, revealing as it did that the person must either have known him or have been told to call upon him in time of need. And as this idea became the more firmly fixed in his mind, the famous inspector racked his brain to think of some person he knew who might get himself—or be compelled to get himself—into such a predicament. But though he was acquainted with many men who were called upon to face danger in all its forms, he could not bring himself to think that the voice was that of any of them.

The statement of the little girl that Frank had frequently besought Olga to marry him and fly with him, when considered in the light of the words in the fragment of letter. "You say he loves you, so he can't suspect you," seemed to point to him as the victim for whom the "offer only held good three days more"—yet it appeared incredible that a person of such apparently weak personality should incur the enmity of the Red Queen and her band or would be entrusted with secrets that would make his death worth while.

And in pondering over these facts and possibilities, the great detective passed almost the entire journey.

As the train slowed down to run through the railroad yards in the National Capital, Pietro began to wonder if he should find more of the mysterious agents awaiting his arrival and, with a sudden determination to baffle them, if they should be on the lookout for him, he left his stateroom, gave the porter a substantial tip to open one of the vestibule doors and quietly dropped to the ground.

Picking his way carefully among the many trains and shifting engines and over the tracks, he at last emerged upon a street and was soon speeding toward the center of the city in a cab which he summoned from a drug store.

It had been his intention to go direct to the Russian Embassy but as he neared the imposing mansion, the idea flashed through his mind that it would be best to go to that of Great Britain and he gave the necessary change in orders to his driver.

Dismissing his cab as he reached the gate to the embassy, the famous inspector entered and, writing on his card "Very Important," requested the flunky to take it without delay to the ambassador.

In a few moments the servant returned and escorted Pietro to the library, on the second floor, where he was greeted by the representative of the British sovereign. "I have heard of you, Inspector," smiled the ambassador. "As I have an engagement shortly, I must ask you to state your 'important' business briefly."

"I will, sir," returned the great detective and, drawing the photograph of the distinguished looking Englishman from his pocket, he handed it to him, asking: "Can you tell me who that is?"

Taking it, the ambassador adjusted his glasses, then raised it, starting violently as he discerned the features.

"Where did you get this photograph?" he demanded, excitedly.

"Suppose you answer my question, Mr. Ambassador, and then I'll answer yours," smiled Pietro.

"That man's name is never spoken here," exclaimed the dignitary. "Walls, especially in embassies, have ears. But I'll write it for you!" And without delay, he took pencil and paper and wrote on it, then gave it to the great detective.

Surprised at the ambassador's words, Pietro eagerly glanced at the name—and read:

"Hastings Courtenay, chief of the British secret agents."

"Now tell me where you got this?" and the ambassador tapped the photograph with his finger. "Up until you handed it to me, it was the belief of my government—and of myself, naturally—that no picture of that man was in existence!"

"If your walls have such ears that it is not safe to mention that name, it certainly will not be for me to tell you how I came into possession of the photograph. Yet it is important that you *should* know—for you may be able to give me information that will help me solve a murder."

"Do you mean that—that *he* has been murdered?" gasped the ambassador, springing from the chair into which he had dropped.

"I can't tell you—yet. But I don't think so. If you know a man of this name and there is any connection bearing upon the presence of the two in this country, it may help me."

As he spoke, the famous inspector wrote the words "Tomasso Barzef" on the same piece of paper with that of the British agent and handed it to the ambassador.

"If I know him?" he exclaimed, as his eyes rested on the name, and growing very pale. "Why, man, he has been selected by the 'Reds' to put an end to the Czar—and this other chap, as a favor to Russia, has been loaned to track him down before he can consummate his foul purpose!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE INTERRUPTED CONFERENCE.

It was the turn of the famous inspector to be amazed and, as he heard the remarkable words of the ambassador, he gazed from that individual to the photograph, in silence.

"Suppose we go to some hotel where we can obtain a suite and talk matters over," suggested the Englishman. "I think this affair is of sufficient importance for me to call Russia into the conference."

And picking up his telephone, the representative of the British sovereign was soon in communication with

the ambassador from the land of the Czar. Only a few words from the former were necessary to gain the consent of the other to join the meeting and between them it was arranged that they should meet at the Hotel Morley.

"If it's just the same to you, Mr. Ambassador," interrupted the great detective, "couldn't the conference be held at the Brunswick? I am expecting despatches there."

"That being the case, it certainly will not do! The 'Reds' probably give you the credit for knowing more about this affair than you do—and in such an event, they will dog your every move. Indeed, I believe your going to the Brunswick would be fraught with the gravest dangers to yourself!"

Nothing could have told the famous inspector the terrible fear in which the anarchists were held by the crowned heads of Europe and their ambassadors than these words and, despite himself, Pietro could not but help catching some of the infectious terror.

"But my despatches, they are likely to prove of the greatest importance, how can I obtain them if I do not go to the Brunswick?"

"I'll send one of my men for them. Knowing the manager intimately, I can arrange it."

And without more ado, the ambassador again picked up the telephone and was given connection with the manager of the hostelry to which Pietro had directed his assistant to wire him.

"What's that? There's a man at the desk now, asking for telegrams for Pietro? Just tell him there are none—and hurry! I'll hold the wire, yes." And turning to the famous inspector, the Englishman gave a significant nod.

In silence, the two men awaited further word from the manager.

"Yes, yes, I'm listening," exclaimed the ambassador, suddenly. "You have two despatches? And you were just in time to prevent the clerk from letting the inquirer know? Good. Have them sent to the Morley to suit J. Get the messenger out some side way and have him go in a taxi. I shall be at the Morley in time to receive them. No, you needn't worry about that, I will answer for your not getting into trouble with Pietro. Thank you. Goodbye."

"Did you ever know anything like the power of these 'Reds'?" demanded the Englishman, as he hung up the receiver. "They have their agents, women as well as men, everywhere—and nowadays, there's no knowing who is a member of their band and who is not. If you had ever gone to the Brunswick, the probabilities are that you would never have left it alive."

"But if this is a band of anarchists, why do they use the stiletto as their method of destruction?" demanded the great detective.

"That again shows their cunning. By doing so, they suggest the crime being committed by some Black Hand, Mafia or Cammorist society—and the police are thrown off the track completely, devoting all their energies to running down Italians."

For a few moments, there was a silence, then the famous inspector exclaimed:

"Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. That information is worth more to me than almost anything you could have told me. It explains a great many things that have puzzled me. Do you——"

But the Englishman interrupted Pietro to suggest

that it would be best for them to defer any further talk until they reached the suite in the Morley and quickly he summoned his automobile.

As they entered it, the great detective noticed that in addition to the chauffeur, a man, with a bulge across the robe over his knees suggesting the presence of a rifle, sat on the front seat while a second man was inside the limousine.

Arrived at the hotel, they went directly to the suite, accompanied by the person who had ridden inside the machine with them, and, passing into an inner room, Pietro noticed that this fellow took his position in front of the door behind which the conference was to be held.

"Merely a matter of precaution," smiled the ambassador, as he noted the look of surprise these preparations brought to the face of the great detective. "Though you may not realize it, this is probably one of the most momentous meetings that has taken place in Washington within a decade!"

Could the ambassador have known what was passing through the mind of the great detective, however, he would not have been flattered—for Pietro was thinking that it was small wonder so many assassinations were accomplished when the prominent men of various nations heralded their movements by the presence of so many guards.

But he discreetly kept his thoughts to himself—and he was destined to learn that the guards often proved of no avail!

Within a few minutes after their arrival, the representative of the Czar of Russia entered the room and, when the famous Inspector had been presented to him, they got down to business.

Briefly Pietro told them of the call he had received and his subsequent discoveries, while his auditors listened with the keenest attention, now and then exchanging significant glances.

"And what do you propose to do, Mr. Pietro?" inquired the Russian ambassador when the story was concluded.

"Why, catch the murderer!" exclaimed the great detective, with a naïveté that brought smiles to the faces of his companions.

"If you do, you'll accomplish more than the united secret agents of Europe have been able to!" declared the representative of the Czar. "By Jove! England, it would be funny if an American should turn the trick, wouldn't it?"

And as though such a thought were beyond the bounds of credulity, the ambassador laughed heartily.

Stung by the manner and words of the foreigner, Pietro gritted his teeth, vowing to himself that he would hang to the trail of Barzef until death should cause him to drop it!

But aloud he said:

"Can either of you tell me who the Red Queen is?"

"If we could, it would be half the battle!" returned the Russian. "So far, she has been able to conceal her identity completely, though it is believed that she is a person of high rank and great wealth."

"H'm. Do you happen to know any one called Olga?"

Dropping his air of condescension at the mention of the name, the ambassador from the land of the Czar sat straight up in his chair.

"Can you describe her?" he asked, breathlessly.

"She is beautiful with very black hair and eyes."

"That might apply to thousands of my country-women," replied the Russian, leaning back, in evident disappointment. "Is that all you can tell me?"

"She affects navy blue clothes and has a fondness for French actors and opera singers," returned the great detective, bringing into play his memory of the garments and photographs he had found in the room at 18 Horace avenue.

For a moment, the ambassador looked at him keenly. "Is that all you know?" he asked.

"Except that she poses as the daughter of Barzeff."

"Too indefinite, altogether, Mr. Pietro," smiled the Russian. But his tone was such that the famous inspector believed him to be lying.

Angered to think that he was being handicapped by the very man whom he would naturally suppose would be the most eager to render him assistance in solving the mystery of the murder, the great detective determined upon a bold stroke.

"Perhaps when I tell you that she is being ardently wooed by this young man, it may serve to freshen your memory, Mr. Ambassador," he exclaimed, in cold, hard tones.

And as he spoke, the famous inspector put his hand inside his coat and drew the picture of the weak faced American from his pocket.

But not more than a foot had he got it away from his body than there sounded a sharp hiss—and something struck the photograph, knocking it from his hand!

In terror, the representatives of the foreign potentates leaped to their feet—while Pietro bent over and picked up a blue stiletto which was plunged directly through the face of the picture!

CHAPTER X.

A GRUESOME PRESENT.

The slight vibration of one of the heavy curtains that covered the only window in the room indicated plainly the spot whence the weapon had been thrown and, with a bound, the great detective was across the room and had drawn the thing aside—disclosing that the lower sash had been raised!

Realizing that no man could have gained access to it or method of departure from it had there not been some outside means of communication with the room, Pietro whipped out his revolver and peered below.

"I can see the fiend!" he cried, at the same time raising his pistol to shoot.

But before he could pull the trigger, a restraining hand was laid upon his arm.

"Don't shoot, inspector!" exclaimed the Englishman. "The report of a pistol would bring the police and the attendants of the hotel—and this is not a matter which the public should know!"

"You mean to tell me that you wish me to let a man go who has not only been eavesdropping but who has destroyed perhaps the one means of identifying the mysterious murderers?" gasped the Pietro, in amazement.

"We don't ask you—we command you!" retorted the Russian.

Scarce believing his ears, the famous inspector looked from one ambassador to the other, his manner breathing defiance—when there came a knock on the door where the guard had been stationed followed by the announcement:

"Some despatches from the Brunswick."

The tension of the moment relieved by these words, the British ambassador quickly opened the door and received the envelopes, then handed them to Pietro.

"You will pardon me, gentlemen, but these are of undoubted importance," murmured the great detective and without waiting for permission, he tore one of the envelopes open, withdrawing the contents, then dropping back into the chair in which he had been sitting when the startling interruption had come.

Having trained himself, the great detective, unlike most of his colleagues, was able to keep the important words of his code in his head and he quickly translated the despatch without recourse to his code-book—and what he read caused him to smile.

"Parties have engaged passage on the Menia, sailing at eleven tomorrow morning. Murdered man is probably chief of British secret service. Big box was shipped to British ambassador this afternoon. Boy is being hoodwinked by 'Reds.' Wealthy. Made to believe he will be president if Czar is overthrown. Our chief wants you to track parties. Has engaged stateroom on boat and purser will deliver you funds upon arrival. Use of Blue Stiletto is ruse. People anarchists. Watch out. Our chief has arranged to have you shadowed to protect you, so don't shoot anyone you think following you. Learned facts from Italian Consul. He's very mad to think use of stiletto casts reflection upon our people. G."

"You have evidently received some goods news?" smiled the Russian ambassador, as the famous inspector finished reading the telegram. "May I see it?"

Amazed at the request, Pietro was on the point of refusing when a glance from the British ambassador caused him to change his mind and he replied, handing over the despatch:

"Certainly."

But that he might avoid translating it, he quickly opened the other, which brought seriousness to his face:

"Reds planning to get you on Pennsylvania. This from Italian Consul's agents. You order stateroom on Pennsylvania then drive to Baltimore and Ohio. Our chief has arranged for stateroom on that for you. Will join you at Wilmington with disguises. Our chief instructs me to sail with you. You are in gravest danger. Keep under cover. G."

When the great detective had translated the last message, he discovered the Russian ambassador looking at him between partially closed eyes.

"Very clever of you, Pietro, I'm sure," he purred. "This code is an absolutely new one to me. Would you mind translating it?"

"I most certainly should!" retorted the famous inspector, emphatically. "So far this evening, you seem to have simply tried to balk my efforts to get at the bottom of this murder—so you can not expect me to be over communicative." Then an idea flashed into his mind and he added: "But I will tell you this much, the parties will be in custody within three hours!"

At this statement, the man from the land of the Czar sprang to his feet.

"I congratulate you—and your men in New York, Pietro!" he exclaimed. "As I said before, you have been able to accomplish what all the secret service agents in Europe have not. But I notice your second message did not please you as well."

"You are mistaken, Mr. Ambassador," dissembled the great detective. "It told me that we should probably know the identity of the murdered man within a short time." Then, turning to the representative of the British sovereign, he said: "May I ask you, Mr. Ambassador, to call up your embassy and ask if a box has been received there from New York?"

"But I'm expecting no box from New York!" protested the Englishman.

"Yet you will receive one—and I have reason to believe it came over on the same train that I did."

So impressed was the ambassador with Pietro's earnestness that he lost no time in calling up his embassy—and when he put down the telephone instrument, he exclaimed:

"You're correct, Inspector, the box has come. Do you happen to know what's in it?"

"I do not," returned Pietro, though to himself he added: "I fancy I could guess."

"Then suppose we go over and find out. Somehow, I have an idea that it is connected with this Barzeff business."

"But we haven't come to any understanding as to what's to be done," protested the Russian. "Why go until we do?"

At the words the British ambassador looked at the great detective.

"I don't see how we *can* come to any agreement," declared the latter. "I have learned about Barzeff and you can't tell me who the 'Red Queen' is."

"But I want to know what you are going to do—whether you are going to try to run them down or not?"

"That remains with my chief," smiled Pietro enigmatically.

And, after a few more questions and answers, the conference broke up, the representatives of the foreign sovereigns returning to their respective embassies—but the Englishman was little prepared for what awaited him!

At his solicitation, Pietro had accompanied him and immediately upon their arrival he had ordered the box brought to his library and opened.

And as the last board was removed, the naked headless body of a powerfully built man was disclosed to view!

CHAPTER XI.

PIETRO THROWS HIS SHADOWERS OFF THE TRACK.

No need was there to tell the two men who gazed at the gruesome present of whom it was the body—both felt intuitively that it was the remains of Hastings Courtenay, the British secret agent!

As the ambassador gazed at the awful spectacle,

horror-bound, Pietro felt about the packing case in an endeavor to find the head—but without success.

"It's as I feared!" he exclaimed, straightening up, adding, in response to the look of inquiry the Englishman directed toward him: "The absence of the head is more of the band's infernal cunning! In this country it is the law that without the head, identification cannot be made legally and the fact of murder established!"

"But I can swear it is Hastings' body!" protested the ambassador. "Look under the right arm and see if you do not find a small crown tattooed."

Much as he loathed the necessity of touching the torso, Pietro obeyed—finding the mark.

"And you mean to tell me with that symbol, I cannot establish a legal identification?"

"All the other agents have the same tattoo, haven't they?" asked the great detective.

"Why, yes."

"Then a lawyer would immediately declare that the body might be that of any one of the others just as well as Courtenay's." Then the famous inspector paused a moment, to continue: "But have no fear—the punishment for this crime will not be meted out in a court of justice!"

"What do you mean?" inquired the ambassador.

"I mean that when I have trailed the Red Queen to her lair, and she realizes that her capture is imminent, she will take her own life rather than fall into my hands, or the hands of any detective."

And, though the famous inspector was not aware of the fact, such was, indeed, the oath by which the members of the Blue Stiletto society bound themselves—self-destruction before capture!

"What do you advise me to do?" asked the Englishman, after a long silence. "I must, of course notify my government of the demise of—er—the man. But what disposition shall I make of the body?"

"I should say, have it embalmed and placed in a vault where it can be guarded and preserved for exhibition or identification, if such a course should be necessary."

"Very well, it shall be done. And now tell me what you intend to do, if you will."

"Track Barzeff!"

"But how? He has had hours' start of you—and I have no doubt that now this man is out of the way, he will not linger long in this country but return to carry out his mission against Russia."

"Probably—still, you can prevent his success for some time by having the Czar go off on a lengthy cruise."

"Excellent! Excellent—for the time being. His Majesty cannot cruise for the remainder of his life, however."

"No, but he can for a couple of months—and by that time he should be freed of Barzeff, though I suppose he can never be rid of the danger for which he stands."

"That, however, is not a matter with which I am concerned. My task is to ferret out your man's murderers. I wish you would tell me how he happened to be inside the house in the Bronx, if you can."

"I merely know that he trailed the man—or was led by him—to this country: that he located him in New York and, under the guise of a worker for the cause, sought to be admitted to the inner circle of 'Reds' to which Barzeff belongs. That he must have succeeded far enough at least to be admitted to the

house, seems evident from his being murdered there."

"Or else he was lured to the place. Can you tell me whether he had a fondness for French detective stories?"

"Why?"

"Because it would tend to establish the fact whether he was an inmate of the house or was brought there," returned the famous inspector, mindful of the novel he had found in the bed in the death-chamber.

"I know he detested them—always said that their most startling situations were as nothing in comparison with those which he and his agents encountered in real life. No, his favorite reading was philosophy."

To Pietro, this answer indicated that the room in which the murder had been committed was probably that of Barzeff and that Courtenay had either been brought bound through the tunnel to the house or had been lured there. Another point, however, there was upon which he wished light and he asked:

"How did he happen to be in possession of my name?"

"He was told that you could render him invaluable assistance, if he should need it, in getting in touch with the various secret societies and bands in New York. I know this, for I, myself, gave him the information."

Until it was time for the great detective to go to the station, the two men talked and of much worth were the disclosures made by the ambassador to the inspector.

"You'd best let me send you to the station in my machine," declared the Englishman, as Pietro rose to take his departure.

"That surely would mark me," he replied. "Indeed, I am so sure that the entrance to your embassy is being watched this very minute that I am going to request you to let me pass out by your secret exit."

"How do you know there is one?" demanded the ambassador, in surprise.

"Because diplomacy always has back doors," smiled the famous inspector and, laughing, the Englishman led the great detective to his private staircase, escorting him even to the door, where he shook hands with him cordially, wishing him success and telling him to call upon any of the British agents throughout the world for funds, should he need them, as they would be instructed to render him every assistance.

Once more in the fresh air, Pietro shook himself, as though eager to be rid of the intrigue and suspicion which hedged the foreign representatives about, and keeping close to the walls of the alley in which he had come out, he soon reached one of the principal avenues of the city where he had no difficulty in procuring a taxicab.

Desirous of knowing whether or not a watch was being kept for him at the Pennsylvania station the fearless inspector ordered the chauffeur to drive there.

As he expected, when he emerged from the cab and paid the driver, he beheld several men standing by the main entrance—but the instant they caught sight of him, they vanished inside.

"This is once when I score," he chuckled to himself. And jumping into another waiting taxi, he was whirled to the other station, where to his relief, he saw no one who aroused his suspicions, and, after inquiring for his tickets and receiving them, he quickly went to his stateroom.

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE TRAIL IN EARNEST.

Leaving instructions with the porter that a gentleman who would board the train at Wilmington and ask for his stateroom was to be shown to it without delay, the famous inspector went to bed as unconcernedly as though the most desperate band of cut-throats in the world was not trying to take his life and was soon fast asleep, awaking only at the sound of Guiseppe's voice calling for admittance.

The greeting between the two men who were bound on so dangerous a mission was brief.

"Before we begin to talk, you are to take off your clothes and put on this suit of Damascus mail," announced the famous detective's assistant, opening his gladstone and taking out a suit of armor formed by myriads of scales.

"But I've never worn such a thing in my life!" protested the great detective.

"And you've never been up against the same sort of a gang before," smiled Guiseppe. "The Italian Consul gave it to me, telling me not to let you set foot in New York unless you had it on."

Impressed with the seriousness of his assistant, Pietro yielded and was soon encased in the armor after which he again donned his clothes.

"How about the disguises you mentioned?" he laughed. "Is it this to what you referred, or are you going to tog me out in most approved story book fashion?"

"You're to wear a beard." And as he spoke, Guiseppe produced a heavy one of black.

"I'll put that on when we get near New York."

"No. You'll do it now. I had a man made up to resemble you appear to descend from the train as soon as it stopped. Inspector Pietro is supposed to be in Wilmington. The chief had a couple of phony despatches addressed to you there and I made a great splurge of leaving a bundle for you at the Marcy House. From now on, you are Carlo Lanza and I'm Giovanni Morosini. Those are the names under which our passage is booked on the Menia."

"That's well enough for me—but how about the fellow who is impersonating me?" demanded the great detective, anxiously. "If I'd known about the business, I never would have allowed it for a minute. *The man is liable to be killed at any time!*"

"Don't worry about him—he knows the danger and before he has reached the Marcy House, he will have resumed his natural appearance."

This arrangement quelled the anxiety of the famous inspector and he plied his assistant with questions about the information he had received from the Italian Consul, which contained little of importance in addition to that which had been conveyed to him in the code-telegram, and in turn imparted the facts he had gleaned from the ambassadors.

"Now tell me how you learned that the band had engaged passage on the Menia," said he.

"After I reported to the chief from the consul, he got busy and sent men out to learn if any one by the names of Frank and Olga had bought tickets. They found several but on the Menia were Frank, Olga and three others, so we decided they must be the people we are after."

"Did he think of arresting them before they sailed?"

"Yes—and then decided it wouldn't do as our information is too flimsy to stand the fight the band would be likely to put up in court. He suggests that our best game is to try to get into the Red Queen's inner circle."

"Which we are about as likely to succeed in doing as we would be to try to walk across the ocean."

"Then what can we do?"

"Depends largely upon circumstances. Roughly speaking, however, I should say that we must trail the murderers until we are reasonably sure we have come to the lair of the Red Queen, then disclose our identities and permit ourselves to be lured into her presence some time when the inner circle is in session."

"Where we'd stand about as much show of getting out alive as we would if we sat on a powder keg and then touched it off," declared Guiseppe.

The famous inspector made no comment upon his assistant's statement, however, and the matter was dropped for the time being.

Before leaving the train, Guiseppe also donned a beard and as they walked up the station platform in Jersey City, they were amused to see several swarthy-hued men scanning each passenger closely as he, or she passed through the gates.

"Mighty good thing we have these beards," breathed Pietro—and he was destined to be even more glad of them!

Deeming it advisable to get aboard the steamship as soon as possible, the two manhunters went direct to the dock of the ocean liner and were soon safely ensconced in their stateroom which they found was an outside one, well aft.

Depositing their luggage, they examined the lock on the door and the fastenings of the portholes, then went out on deck and took up a position where they could watch all who came aboard as well as those who were on deck bidding goodbye to their families and friends.

As the time for the departure of the liner grew nearer and nearer, the lookout kept by the manhunters upon the gang-plank became closer and closer.

Not a person did they see, however, whom by the wildest stretch of imagination, they could make over into any of the band of anarchists.

"Jove! You don't suppose they've given us the slip, do you?" asked Guiseppe, in dismay, as the boat moved out into the river. "It may have been just a bluff, their all engaging passage on the Menia, taking the boats, instead where the single names of Frank and Olga were registered."

"It's possible, of course, but though Tomasso and the rest of the crowd may have gone by different ships, I doubt if the enamored Frank would stand for being separated from Olga," returned the famous inspector. "I—" but he suddenly paused and, nudging his assistant, stared hard at two young men who were walking up the deck toward them.

One was light, the other dark, both wore mustaches and from their dress, they might have passed for the sons of rich men.

"What about them?" asked Guiseppe.

"Just watch them, that's all. They seem to be looking for some one."

And, appearing to be absorbed in watching the fast receding lines of the great metropolis, the famous inspector saw the pair come up and pass him.

But as they did so, the light one exclaimed:

"Frank, I think we really have succeeded in throwing that devil of a Pietro off our trail!"

CHAPTER XIII.

PURSUED AND PURSUERS MEET.

In amazement, the two manhunters heard the words.

"Jove! Do you suppose that dark one is the girl?" whispered Guiseppe, excitedly.

"Can't tell. Have to wait until we get a chance to study them. But from her description, very dark hair and eyes, I should say it probably was. Besides, the children said the boy was light, yet, even studying his photograph the way I have, I never should have recognized him with that mustache. It's surprising how a thing like that will change a man's face!" exclaimed the famous inspector. "Let's trail them round and find out where their staterooms are. They may stop to talk to some of the other members of the band—and then we'll have the chance to get a line on them, too. As disguises seem to be in fashion, they'll probably be wearing them and I want, particularly, to lay my eyes on Barzeff."

This suggestion being in hearty accord with the desires of the assistant, the two manhunters quickly rose from their chairs and strolled along in the wake of the pair they had decided were Frank and Olga—yet when they learned which was which, they were surprised!

"Be sure that you remember to call me Carlo and not inspector," warned the great detective as they sauntered along the deck. "Don't let it slip your mind for a moment—or you'll break out just when it will spoil everything."

The caution was timely—for Guiseppe had caught sight of a man, bearded like themselves who had nodded slightly to the young people and he had it on his tongue to call the attention of his superior to him by speaking his title. And before he could do so, the trio had disappeared into one of the cabins amidships.

"Let's go down and see the number," he suggested, eagerly.

"Now don't be in too much of a hurry," returned the great detective. "As yet, we have no means of knowing that we, also, are not being shadowed—and if we should make such a break as to hustle right down to their staterooms the minute we have laid eyes on Olga and Frank, we should give ourselves dead away. There'll be plenty of time. Fast as the Menia is, she can't get us to the other side under four days and a few hours."

But those four days were ordained to be full of excitement for the manhunters!

In his anxiety lest he alarm the persons he was shadowing, the famous inspector turned on his heel as he uttered the warning and retraced his steps

around the stern to the other side of the ship and then went into his stateroom where they remained until called for lunch.

Upon entering the enormous dining saloon, the manhunters looked eagerly about to learn if their quarry were in the room and to their delight beheld not only the two young men but two others, one of them the bearded man who had nodded to the boys on deck, sitting at a table.

And when the steward led Pietro and Guiseppe to the same table, they could have shouted with joy—for the proximity would afford them an opportunity to study the suspects at close range, should they find it difficult so to do at other times.

With a formal bow toward their table companions, the detectives took their chairs and pretended to be absorbed in reading the menu—but from the corners of their eyes they could see the four scanning them closely.

Having signified the food they desired, the manhunters allowed their gaze to wander casually to the others.

And as the eyes of the famous inspector rested upon the two young men, he noticed gleefully that both of them were wearing wigs!

Desirous of knowing whether or not the suspects would prove sociable, Pietro said, with a bow:

"As we are to be table companions for the next few days, permit me to introduce myself. I am Carlo Lanza and this is my friend, Giovanni Morosini."

Hastily the younger members of the party glanced at their companion with a beard, as though they would take their cue from him.

"Thank you," murmured this person—but he did not return the courtesy of introducing his companions or himself!

Forcing a flush, purposely, to his face at this obvious slight, the great detective said to his assistant in Italian, in the belief that the others would understand:

"They must be English to be so rude! I never yet saw one of them who had the faintest idea of good breeding! I shall make it a point to go to the purser and learn who they are—and, if possible, have him change us to a table where the people at least maintain common courtesy toward their fellows!"

And with this caustic comment, the manhunters proceeded to gaze about the saloon, though keeping a sufficient watch on the suspects to see that the words had been understood by all except the American.

When the awkwardness of the situation had been relieved somewhat by the serving of their food, Pietro determined to anger the members of the band still more and he kept up a constant fire of comment upon their looks and probable social station which brought many a flush to their faces!

Indeed, so did they infuriate the bearded man that he followed them to the smoking room and walking over to the chairs into which they had settled themselves, exclaimed in Italian:

"My son and I happen to understand Italian, sirs, and I demand an apology for your remarks!"

"Apology?" drawled the great detective. "I don't apologize for anything I say, sir—I fight! If you care to wipe out the fancied insult—though I beg to call your attention that when I introduced my friend and myself, you did not have the common courtesy to return the compliment, so that I am really the insulted party—in a duel, I shall be delighted to accommodate you!"

As he finished his words, the famous inspector rose from his chair.

Olga and Frank, however had entered in time to hear the last part of Pietro's remark and, in evident fear that danger might befall them should the bearded man accept the challenge, the girl laid a restraining hand upon his arm, saying to the great detective:

"You must pardon my father's words, sir. He has been under a very great nervous strain and your comments which were a bit severe, have excited him. Daddy, just let the matter drop, please, think what a sensation such an affair would cause aboard." Then added, in Russian: "You can't afford to take any chances!"

A moment, the man seemed to hesitate, then replied:

"Very well, Edgar. I will do as you wish." And turning on his heel, he walked away.

To the surprise of the manhunters, the young men did not follow him, however, instead dropping into chairs close at hand, while the one who had appealed to the elder man said:

"My name is Edgar Raymond and this is Frank Stebbins. If you don't mind my saying so, I think it was an awfully clever way you took revenge on Daddy for ignoring your courtesy at the table. Are you willing to forget the unpleasantness and have a drink with us?"

"Certainly, if you wish," smiled Pietro, while to himself he added: "Does she suspect us?"

CHAPTER XIV.

PIETRO SURPRISES ONE OF THE SUSPECTS.

The answer to the great detective's question was to come in startling form—but not being endowed with the ability to read the future, Pietro was obliged to content himself with watching every word and facial expression of his strange companions.

When the liquor had been served, the fellow who had been introduced as Frank proposed a game of bridge. In the belief that the suspects could not be put up to mischief while they were directly under his

eye, the great detective readily consented and soon pursued and pursuers were engaged in trying to win money from one another.

From time to time, more drinks were ordered, and appearing to assume a more cordial manner because of their influence, the young fellows began to ply the manhunters with questions.

"Are you native or American Italians?" suddenly asked the chap called Edgar, with the most innocent manner in the world.

But the famous inspector realized that the question was loaded—and for the instant he was non-plussed as to what answer he should make. If he professed to be a native, he knew it would call forth many interrogations about his home, the life there and all sorts of intimate matters while should he declare himself an American, there lay the danger that his companions might suspect his identity.

Realizing, however, that delay would be sure to arouse distrust of him, he replied:

"Most people would make the mistake of calling us natives but we come from Sicily—and to us, there really is a difference."

"That's the land of secret societies and all sorts of dread organizations for revenge, isn't it?" exclaimed Edgar. "How delightful. I mean that you are from there," he added, hastily, as the others laughed at his words. "I've always wanted to meet a real, died-in-the-blood Sicilian and now that I have the opportunity, I'm going to ask you all sorts of questions. May I?"

Whether or not this was a challenge, the great detective did not know—but he had burned his bridges behind him, so he answered:

"I shall be delighted to tell you all I can. But first, you must understand that Sicily is not nearly so full of desperate men as it is made out to be."

"Naturally you would say so," smiled his inquisitor. Then asked abruptly: "Have you ever had any one on your trail?"

To a man less accustomed to controlling his facial expression than the famous inspector, the suddenness of the question and the manner in which the chap gazed at him would have led him to betray himself—but instead he smiling replied:

"So far, I have been fortunate enough to escape such trouble. You know, there is really no need of incurring the enmity of any of the avenging bands or societies unless a person does some wrong and is powerful enough to be able to avoid punishment through the courts."

This answer brought a flash to the eye of Edgar and for a moment he regarded the great detective quizzically.

Realizing that the situation was fraught with danger, Pietro determined not to let it get away from him by keeping it in his own channels and announced:

"My friend, Giovanni, has not been so lucky as I, however. He had the vendetta declared against him—which is the reason we took a trip to the United States."

"If that's the case, why are you coming back?"

"Because the leader of the band is dead."

"How interesting. So long as it's all over, I don't suppose you mind telling me about it, do you?" And the chap looked at Guiseppe.

"I don't mind Carlo's telling you—I, myself, never like to speak about it," he returned.

This dangerous point so cleverly avoided, the great detective said:

"What do you wish to know?"

"Oh, everything, how it was declared and all about it. Do they send threats, like the Black Handers in our country?"

"Sometimes they do and sometimes they don't," smiled Pietro. "In this instance, it was more like the workings of the anarchists, they just dogged Giovanni's steps until he decided to leave the country for a while."

At his reference to the "reds," the famous inspector watched the faces of his companions closely but by never so much as a flicker of an eyelash did they show any emotion.

But his words had the effect of turning the conversation into other channels and the suspects became less inquisitive.

Which of the two was Olga and which Frank was puzzling the great detective badly. At one time he was inclined to believe that the blonde was she and then the darker seemed more like her. He had hoped that, as the liquor took effect and they became more sociable, some shade of the voice might disclose the girl but so perfectly did she imitate the speech of a rather effeminate youth that he was completely deceived.

Yet he was determined to find out and, the old trick of tossing something into the lap, to see whether the recipient would open or close the knees occurring to him, he bided his time till he had the opportunity to work it.

As they finished one hand of bridge and were waiting for the points to be scored, his chance came!

"May I trouble you to pass me the cigarettes?" asked Edgar, lolling back in the chair.

"No trouble," murmured the famous inspector. And picking up the box, he tossed it so that it would strike the lap.

Unconsciously, the chap hurriedly opened his knees—and the secret was out!

Flushing in spite of herself, the girl struck the box so that it fell to the floor and then stooped over to pick it up, with the evident purpose of regaining her composure.

"I beg your pardon!" exclaimed Pietro, guilelessly.

Neither of the others had been sitting so they could see Olga's tell-tale action—but when she again raised her head she bent a searching glance at the man who had caused her betrayal of herself.

But so absolutely innocent was his expression that she was at a loss to know whether or not he had done the trick on purpose or merely from lack of thought.

The realization that she had exposed herself to discovery by a keen observer, however, seemed to worry

her and it was some time before she had recovered her composure. And when she did, she suggested that the game end.

Yet had she known what was going on in the great detective's stateroom, she would have cut her throat before she would have stopped playing!

After settling their scores, the two manhunters got up and sauntered away, led by some occult force to their cabin.

And as they opened the door, they beheld a man kneeling down before Guiseppe's gladstone!

CHAPTER XV.

THE DETECTIVES TAKE A PRISONER.

So suddenly and unexpectedly had the great detective opened the door that the fellow at the bag had no time either to rise or conceal himself and as he stared aghast at the two powerful men standing in the doorway, Pietro whipped out his revolver and covered him.

"A move or a sound—and you're dead!" snapped the famous inspector, grimly. "Giovanni, shut the door."

Quickly did his assistant obey. Had he been a minute later, however, he would have seen two young men, one blonde and the other dark, steal silently down the passageway and pause before the stateroom, listening intently.

After the departure of the manhunters from the table, in the dining saloon, they had been the subject of lively speculation by the four members of the band whose guilty consciences saw a detective in every person who approached them or gave them even passing attention. And that they might learn whether their suspicions of their two table companions were correct or not, they had devised the plan of having the bearded man seek to pick a quarrel and then for the supposed Edgar to appease him and become acquainted with the men of whom they were scared, engaging them at cards or in any manner possible while their cabin was being ransacked.

How Olga and Frank carried out their part of the programme, the reader already knows.

That their efforts had turned out anything but to the girl's liking caused her to end the game when she believed sufficient time had elapsed for the examination of the luggage in the stateroom—but she had not counted on the fact that frequent passing of people in the passageway might prevent the man from gaining an immediate entrance. And such had been the fact.

But as they hearkened at the door, she and Frank became quickly aware of it!

"What's your name?" demanded the great detective, sternly.

"Ivan Dolgoruky."

"Why did you enter this stateroom?"

"Why do you suppose?"

"Answer me!"

"To make mud pies!"

"Don't attempt to get funny—your life hangs by a thread! For what purpose did you come to this stateroom?"

"What difference does it make to you, you've got me, haven't you?"

"I certainly have. Giovanni, put the shutters over that port-hole and then look in my bag and yours to see if the fellow has stolen anything!"

While he realized that the prisoner might be nothing more than an ordinary burglar, it was the belief of the great detective that he was one of the band of suspects, yet he resembled none of the men who had sat at the table with him, for he was not more than thirty-five years old and his hair was of a decided red, and Pietro was determined to make him confess his purpose, if such a thing were possible.

Barzeff being the man of all who was most interested in learning the identity of the persons about him, the great detective thought, as he first opened the door and caught sight of the kneeling figure that it was he. But the description furnished by the little girl in the Bronx was of a man with grey hair and, when he saw the color of his prisoner's, he immediately abandoned the idea.

But the famous inspector was destined to learn that the grey hair was only a wig and that the man he had in his power in his stateroom was, indeed, the terrible Barzeff!

Never taking his eyes from his captive, Pietro waited until his assistant had carried out his instructions and reported that not a thing of their possessions had been taken.

"You hear that?" exclaimed the great detective. "If you were an ordinary burglar, you would have taken some of our stuff. As you haven't, I want you to tell me why you came in here?"

But the fellow maintained a sullen silence.

Suddenly an idea flashed into the famous inspector's head by which he could entrap the fellow and, addressing his assistant, he said:

"Giovanni, it must be what we have feared. When Guilermo died, he passed the vendetta against you down to others of his society and this fellow is the one who has been chosen to carry out the decree. Before striking his blow, however, he wished to make sure that you were the man and so he came here to examine our belongings. Am I right, fellow?"

So seriously did the great detective promulgate this idea and so plausible was it, that the prisoner was deceived and fell into the trap, evidently believing that by so doing, he could put an end to his examination

and, if he should be turned over to the authorities when the boat touched a port, that he could easily disprove the charge, thus regaining his liberty.

Accordingly, with a well simulated snarl, he exclaimed:

" You guessed it!"

" Aha, Giovanni, luck is favoring us. Search the fellow's pockets and take away his weapons so that he will not be able to take his own life and then we'll turn him over to the captain."

At the thought that his clothes would be examined, the prisoner blanched, then despite the revolver pointed at his head, sprang to his feet, assuming an attitude which showed he intended to defy the search.

With a leap, the famous inspector was upon him, the cold steel of the muzzle of his pistol pressed against the man's temple!

" Another move and I'll knock you unconscious!" he hissed. " Giovanni, tie his hands behind him!"

And as he uttered the command, Pietro shoved forward his hand which held the revolver, jerking the fellow's head backwards so sharply that it brought a gasp of pain from him!

At the same time, Guiseppe seized the prisoner's hands and quickly twisted them behind him, yanking a strap from his bag with which he bound them tightly.

So sudden had been the movements that the fellow had had no time to offer any resistance and as he realized that he was helpless, his face took on an expression of awful fury.

" Some trick, eh?" grinned the famous inspector.

Unable to bear the taunt and the thought of the ease with which he had been rendered harmless, the man broke into a volley of Russian curses and threats, the only one of which the great detective could understand was:

" You'll pay for this with your heart's blood, whoever you are! Wait till I get you before the Red Queen and then see who'll laugh!"

Paying no heed to the fellow's range, Guiseppe examined one pocket after another, bringing forth several pieces of letters, two blue stilettos, some three hundred dollars in money, a watch and a curiously wrought cross, evidently a pocket piece.

" Give him back the money and the watch," directed Pietro. " We'll keep these other things. The papers probably have something to do with the vendetta against you. The stilettos are direct evidence against him and the pocket-piece may be the open sesame to the meetings of his society."

As he spoke, the great detective watched the prisoner closely and from the expression in his eyes he felt sure that the papers contained information that would be of much value.

But the fellow was determined not to part with them without protest.

" You have no right to take these things from me and keep them!" he stormed. " If any one is to have them, it should be the captain. If you don't give them back to me this instant, I'll make a charge against you of robbery!"

" Now don't make too many threats or it will go all the harder with you," returned Pietro. " These things which we have taken from you are to be used as evidence against you. You remember you admitted you had received an order from your society to put my friend out of the way. If you can prove your innocence in the face of that charge, you will receive them back."

" Then let me see you give them to the captain."

" I want to look them over first."

At the words, the fellow broke out into wild ravings and curses which were cut short by the great detective:

" I'm tired of this growling. Open the door, Giovanni, and we'll take the fellow to the skipper and mind, you, if you make any outcry or other disturbance on the way, I'll club you over the head with my gun and put you out of commission for a while!"

Giving the papers and the stilettos to the famous inspector, his assistant opened the door.

And to his amazement, as he did so, he beheld Frank and his companion standing in the passageway!

CHAPTER XVI.

OLGA IS CAUGHT EAVESDROPPING.

So unexpected had been the action to the eavesdroppers that they had not had time to get away and as they realized their predicament, Olga flushed hotly: stammering:

" We've come to give you back some of your money, Mr. Lanza. You overpaid us when we settled our bridge score."

The lameness of the excuse amused the great detective and, as he noted the glances that flashed back and forth between his prisoner and the two persons in the passageway, he was delighted for they told him as plainly as words that they were all of the band of suspects, thus setting at rest any doubt he had as to the personality of his captive.

But his answer to the blushing Olga was ingenuous.

" By Jove! Raymond, you've come just in time to see a real live member of a vendetta! We found this fellow in our room going through Giovanni's bag. I accused him of having come to find out about my friend before attempting to carry out his mission of death and he confessed.

" If you'd come along a few minutes sooner, you would have heard him raving and cursing! Take a good look at him—and then when you get back to your country you can tell your friends that you saw a fellow

who was trailing his man. Look, we took these stilettos from him. Ever see one of such fine workmanship? Just test them and find out how flexible they are!"

The girl, however, could not bring herself to touch the weapon the great detective held out to her and mumbling something that neither of the manhunters could understand, she drew back against Stebbins.

"I don't blame you for not caring to handle them, they're not pretty things—especially when one realizes they were meant to be buried in a man's heart!"

"We're on our way to take the man down to the captain. Want to come along?"

Olga was on the point of refusing when the prisoner burst out into what seemed to be another tirade of abuse and execration—but the famous inspector understood his words as he said in Russian:

"Come along. You can see where they put me. If you're smart, you may have the chance to get me out and I can hide in one of our staterooms!"

"Much obliged. I'll remember that and see that you don't get the chance," exclaimed the great detective to himself, while aloud he said: "See here, my man, I told you that if you made any more disturbance, I'd beat you over the head—and that goes from now on, understand?"

"Coming Raymond?"

"Yes, I think I will."

"Then kindly walk ahead. If we should meet any one, it wouldn't attract quite so much attention as it would if we should all follow the prisoner."

Loathe, indeed, were the girl and Frank to form the van of the procession which meant so much to them but they could think of no sufficiently good excuse to offer and, accordingly, obeyed.

Not far had they advanced when they met one of the stewards.

Pausing in surprise, he asked:

"What's wrong, gentlemen? What does this mean?"

"Simply that I caught this man in my cabin going through my luggage," replied Pietro. "I should appreciate it very much if you would go to the captain and tell him that Mr. Lanza would like to see him as soon as possible. Meantime, where shall I take the fellow?"

"The only place I know is one of the ship's vaults—unless you should be willing to have him put in the brig, that's forward among the crew's quarters, you know."

As the two places of imprisonment were mentioned, the great detective fancied he could hear the suspects short intakes of breath as they awaited his answer—and he determined to allay their alarm, for the time being.

"The brig would be best, I think."

"Very well, sir. I'll take you to it and then summon the captain."

"All right, and take us by the way we are the least

likely to be seen, please. There is no use of having this business bruited about all over the boat."

As this suggestion not only met with the desire of the steward but of the suspects, they were quickly descending one of the companionways to a lower deck where they were soon at the brig.

Leaving them to get the keys, the steward returned in due course, the prisoner was locked in and then all returned to the upper deck—but Olga and Frank quickly left the manhunters.

"The captain will see you in the pursuer's office, gentlemen," announced the steward as soon as he had communicated with that officer. And going to the place designated, they were shortly joined by the commander of the boat.

Aware of the identity of the two bearded men, yet ignorant of their mission aboard ship, the captain looked at them questioningly.

Briefly the great detective related the events in his stateroom, and playing up the story of the vendetta, accompanied by a significant wink, in case any one should be listening.

"Do you think the brig will hold the fellow if he's as desperate as all that?" asked the captain, winking in return to show that he understood the meaning of the famous inspector, that he believed the man to be more than an ordinary criminal.

"Yes, I think so," he said aloud, then added, in a voice scarcely audible: "When it comes night I will go down with you and transfer him to the vault. He has accomplices aboard who would undoubtedly manage to liberate him from the brig."

In amazement, the skipper heard these words but he offered no comment, merely saying:

"Very well. By the way, should you like to come up on the bridge with me?"

Knowing that the captain's quarters were close to that sacred spot on an ocean liner and realizing that he would be able to study the papers he had taken from the prisoner up there without fear of interruption, the great detective quickly accepted and the three men went up to the bridge.

"Just what sort of a game is this?" asked the skipper when they were safe in his cabin.

"I can't tell you, exactly, sir. But it's a desperate one. In fact, it's life or death for this gang or my assistant and me!"

"Huh, and they call being captain of an ocean liner a dangerous position. Why, man dear, there isn't money enough in this world to make me change places with you this minute!" exclaimed the skipper.

"Well, let's talk about something else," suggested Pietro. "It doesn't do a man's nerve any good to let him dwell upon the danger he's running. And now, if you don't mind, I've some papers I took from the fellow that I should like to study."

And taking them from his pocket, the famous inspector began to translate them while Giuseppe and the captain went out onto the bridge.

But to the disappointment of Pietro, he found them to be nothing more than the manual for the initiation of members of the dread society to which the suspects belonged. Yet he kept them in case it should be necessary for him to become a member in order to capture the murderers.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE STRUGGLE FOR LIFE.

Unfortunately for the great detective, it did not occur to him that his prisoner might have given a false name. Had it done so and he had taken the trouble to see if an Ivan Dolgoruky were registered, he would have found that there was no such name upon the books of the purser—and he would have saved Guiseppe and himself a series of adventures which came within an ace of costing their lives!

While the manhunters were enjoying themselves upon the bridge, one watching the guidance of the boat and the other lolling in the comfortable cabin of the captain, there was a far different scene being enacted in the stateroom of Olga.

No sooner had she reached it than she flew into a violent passion, abusing Frank and the two strangers until she was forced to stop from sheer exhaustion. But with the passing of her paroxysm, came the realization of the necessity for action and she quickly despatched her faithful swain to summon the other two members of the band.

"Who are the two strangers?" asked one of them, whom the girl addressed as Sergius.

"That's what we've got to find out. They can't be Pietro and one of his men or we should have received a wireless from one of our agents back in New York."

"However, we'll have the chance to find out about them before we land at Fairhaven. The thing to be done now is to get Barzeff out of the brig!"

And for hours they discussed the best methods for accomplishing their purpose, finally deciding upon sounding out one of the sailors as to whether or not he would do the trick of liberating the important member of their band in return for a large sum of money.

But before they had time to put the project to the test, the prisoner was removed to the vault—as Sergius

discovered when he went down to the brig to talk with Barzeff.

This action threw the remainder of the band into a panic, suggesting to them as it did that some information must have been received which told the captain that the man was more than an ordinary prisoner—but, curiously, they did not suspect the great detective of being the cause of the transfer.

"There's only one thing to do, as matters stand," finally declared Sergius.

"Out with it!" snapped Olga.

"We must get Lanza, scare him almost to death some way and get him to promise not to turn Barzeff over to the authorities when we reach Fairhaven. If it's done, he'll be recognized—and then the Red Queen will make us pay the penalty for not accomplishing our mission."

"But suppose he won't promise?" objected the third man, whom his companions called Alexis.

"Then we must get rid of him and his companion!"

"That's the way to take only when everything else fails," declared Olga. "There are still three days before we shall touch land and something may turn up in the meanwhile."

"Now hurry back to your cabins, you two, and don't let any one see you. Keep out of sight all you can. If anything important turns up, I'll send Frank for you."

"How about it in case one of those fellows asks for your supposed father?" exclaimed Sergius, looking at the girl.

"I can put them off by telling them he's sea-sick and if worst comes to worst, one of you can dress up in his clothes and put on the beard. Now be off! Come, Frank, let's go to the smoking room to see if Lanza and his friend are there."

But though they searched the boat over for the manhunters, they were unable to find them and it was not until dinner when they met.

Despite all her efforts, the girl could not conceal a certain nervousness as she greeted the two men, much to the great detective's delight, and he lost no time in saying:

"By the way, Raymond, our would-be murderer has been removed by the captain and put in the vault. The skipper didn't think the brig was strong enough to hold him. There are some Italians among the stokers and he feared the fellow might bribe them with his three hundred dollars to liberate him."

"But why should they want to set him free when it's you, also Italians, whom he wants to murder?" asked Olga.

"They may belong to his society."

"What's the name of it?"

"We're not sure, of course, but the skipper thinks it must be the Blue Stiletto—on account of the color of the ones found in his pocket."

Again did the girl shift the subject to other grounds, as she had done in the afternoon, and under her manipulation, much to the amusement of the famous in-

spectors, it was kept away from vendetta and all kindred topics.

After dinner, they all adjourned to the smoking room and again indulged in bridge and for the next three days, the time was passed in the same way, eating, smoking, drinking and playing cards, varied with sunbaths on deck and promenades.

On the evening of the fourth day, when the liner was again within reach of the wireless, a message was received for Edgar Raymond.

Through the captain, the operator had been instructed to hold any despatches received for any of the suspects until the great detective should have a chance to look them over, after which they were to be delivered, if he saw fit.

As it chanced, Pietro was on the bridge when the wireless was received and going into the operating room in response to the summons, he read:

"Edgar Raymond, Menia. P. aboard with assistant under name Lanza. J."

"Want that delivered?" asked the operator with a smile.

"Not tonight," smiled the famous inspector. And in a trice he had torn the message into bits which he scattered to the winds.

But while he was destroying the wireless despatch that would have acquainted the members of the band with his identity, they were planning his capture in Olga's stateroom!

Despairing of any circumstance turning up that would enable them to liberate Barzeff by fair means, the girl had decided it was time to put the suggestion of Sergius of forcing Lanza to forego his prosecution of the prisoner into practice.

"He always takes a stroll on the promenade deck about ten o'clock," she announced. "Sergius, you and Alexis will hide behind one of the life boats near the stern and when he comes along, grab him. If Morosini happens to be with him, seize him, also. You two ought to be more than a match for them. Make them promise if you can—if you can't well, we must get Barzeff off!"

Thoroughly did the two men understand the meaning of this sinister remark and without any comment, they hurried away to take up their positions.

On account of the concert in the main saloon, the promenade deck was unusually free of people and the two cut-throats took the fact as an omen favorable to their purpose.

But they reckoned without taking into consideration the tremendous strength of the man they hoped to intimidate.

As the hour of ten approached, Alexis whispered:

"Let's cover our faces with handkerchiefs. We may be able to make the dub believe we're men from the stoke hole. Members of the Blue Stiletto society he told Olga about, you know." And laughing at their fancied cleverness, the two men lost no time in hiding their features.

Scarcely had they done so, than they saw the familiar figure of the supposed Lanza slowly coming toward them.

"He's alone! Leave him to me, I thought of the scheme!" whispered Sergius. "But stand ready to help, if I should need any!"

Crouching like a tiger ready to spring, the member of the band watched his victim approach. With aggravating preversity, he paused several times to gaze off over the waves and it seemed to the men waiting for him that he was on the point of turning back before reaching them. But at last he came within their distance—and, like a rock from a catapult, Sergius sprang upon the great detective, catching him from behind with a strangle hold about the neck!

Taken completely off his guard, it was several seconds before Pietro could bring his muscles into play—and when he did try to tear his captor's arms loose, he found them firmly interlocked.

"I've got you at last! You would try to interfere with the edicts of the Blue Stiletto, would you?" hissed the fellow in his ear. "We'll teach you not to meddle! Listen, you can save your life if you will swear a solemn oath not to press the charge against Ivan! Will you do it?"

"Let me g-go! I can't s-speak!" gasped the great detective.

"Oh, no you don't! I ain't that foolish! If you agree to what I just said, nod your head three times! If you don't—over the rail you'll go! And nobody'll ever be the wiser!"

As he spoke, Sergius was slowly forcing the famous inspector closer and closer to the railing and, though he struggled with might and main, such a terrible hold did the fellow have around his neck that he could not throw him loose!

Of a sudden, however, there sounded to the great detective the beat of footsteps coming down the deck toward him—and so quickly that his captor did not have time to check him, Pietro whirled and dashed toward the promenader!

CHAPTER XVIII.

BARZEFF EFFECTS A DISGUISE.

As the famous inspector dashed away, Alexis leaped after him. But before he could overtake the fleeing man, the promenader in front had been attacked by

the sound of running feet and, hastening his own steps, he was soon upon the struggling men.

"Giovanni!"

"Carlo!"

The exclamations, coming at the same time, were uttered in vastly different tones, however, for it was with difficulty that the great detective could utter the assumed name of his assistant.

But the realization that help was at hand gave renewed strength to the fast tiring Pietro while it took the heart out of the would-be assassins.

"G-get that other man, G-Giovanni!" gasped the famous inspector. "I c-can m-manage this o-one!"

And as his assistant dashed past him in pursuit of Alexis, who had turned tail and sought to escape, once he saw that re-inforcements had arrived to help out the man they intended to intimidate into practically releasing their fellow, Pietro summoned all his strength—and made a sudden leap to one side, driving the fellow on his back against the cabin with terrific force!

So unexpected was the move—and such excruciating pain did it send through his body—that Sergius lost his hold. And with a wrench forward, the famous inspector was free!

Realizing that he must recapture his intended victim were he to save himself, the Russian bounded at the man he had lately held at his mercy—only to be met by a stunning blow, full in the face, that sent him to the deck like a log.

In a trice, the great detective was upon him, his knees pressing with all his strength against Sergius' chest.

Assured of victory, Pietro rested a bit to get his breath, then drew his revolver from his pocket and placed it against the Russian's temple.

"Move without my permission and I'll knock you on the head with the barrel of this pistol!" he hissed. Then anxious for the safety of his assistant, he called: "Giovanni! Have you got your man?"

But Sergius was desperate and, taking advantage of his captor's momentary distraction, he suddenly threw up his hands, catching the famous inspector under the chin forcing him over backward.

Successful as his attempt had been, he was not able to turn it to his use, however, for Pietro was upon his feet first and, raising his revolver in the air, he brought it down with tremendous force, striking Sergius on the side of the head and sending him to the deck again.

"I fancy that will hold you for a few minutes!" exclaimed the great detective as, pistol ready for instant use, he set out to find Guiseppe.

A glance down toward the stern told him that the two men were not on that side of the boat and he ran across to the other, just in time to see one the contestants lift his antagonist to the top of the rail—but before he could drop him over, the man clutched the top strand with the strength of desperation.

Rushing upon them as fast as he could, the famous

inspector saw that it was his assistant who had come so close to being consigned to a watery grave and, with a snarl, he hurled himself upon the Russian, smashing him across the face with the barrel of his pistol while with his other hand he seized Guiseppe.

So terrific was the onslaught that Alexis, powerful man though he was, could not withstand it and cursing and shrieking, he fell to his knees!

Putting forth all his strength, Pietro raised his assistant back over the rail, then laid him on the deck and again turned his attention to the member of the anarchist band just as the fellow was groping blindly about in the endeavor to clutch the great detective's legs and pull him to the deck.

Realizing that the man was tougher than his colleague, for the blow he had received in the face was sufficient to knock out an ordinary person, Pietro hastily "clubbed" his revolver and drove it with awful force down on Alexis' head—and with a groan, the fellow toppled backward.

The shouts and the tramp of feet had attracted the attention of sailors and officers and as the famous inspector was getting to his feet, they swarmed down toward the stern.

"What's wrong?" demanded the captain, who chanced to be among them.

"Nothing, now," smiled the great detective. "Two more of the vendetta tried to get me—but with my friend's help, I've managed to turn the tables on them!"

Giving vent to language that would have done any old time pirate proud, the skipper ordered the men picked up and carried below to the vault.

For the moment, Pietro thought of suggesting the brig, then decided not to—and bitterly was he to repent his failure so to do!

Fortunately, the concert in the saloon prevented the sounds of the struggle from reaching the passengers and all evidences of the encounter which had come so near to being the death of both the manhunters were quickly removed and the prisoners safely locked within the vault before the entertainment ended.

Amazed to see his companions in crime brought to his prison, Barzeff, however determined to take advantage of the fact and quickly he removed the false beard from the face of Sergius, put it on himself and then appropriated the other man's clothes. And so well did the beard disguise him that when the great detective looked at the prisoners the next morning, he failed to recognize the trick that had been played upon him.

Having learned of the result of the attempt to overpower the two Italians, Olga and Frank kept to their staterooms, where they sat the entire night, pistols in hand, awaiting a call from the men they had tried to do to death. But though they were not sought by the manhunters, they formed the topic of their earnest deliberations.

"Why not bag the girl and the kid, now that we can put our hands on them?" inquired Guiseppe of his chief.

"And lose all chance we have of striking the trail of Barzeff and the Red Queen?" retorted the famous manhunter. "Are you crazy, man? We've got three of the band—and Olga is so frightened that, unless I'm mightily mistaken, she will go post haste to the lair of the she-devil who is at the head of this inner circle! We can't even prove—except by the children, and they might be kidnapped or intimidated—that Olga, Frank or any of the others were at the house in Horace avenue. No, Guiseppe, much as I should like to arrest them, our case isn't strong enough!"

But though the famous inspector was correct in his surmise that the girl would make straight for the hiding place of the Red Queen, he found that she was more resourceful than he had given her credit for being!

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MYSTERIOUS SIREN.

Having come to the decision that it would be inexpedient to take the girl and young chap into custody, Pietro went down to the purser to learn where the pair intended to leave the ship, learning that they had ordered their trunks put ashore at Havre instead of remaining aboard until the boat reached Naples.

"That being the case, I fancy I'd better send a wireless to have some inspectors meet the ship at Fairhaven to take off my three prisoners," declared the famous inspector and accordingly he did so.

Not more than five o'clock in the morning was it when the boat arrived in Fairhaven harbor and few of the passengers were astir, save those who intended to disembark there, and the secret agents who had been despatched to the ship in answer to Pietro's request boarded her, received their prisoners and removed them without causing more than passing comment.

"What do you wish us to do with them?" asked one of the agents, turning to the great detective.

"Hold them until you hear from me. As they're really diplomatic prisoners, you can do it, can't you? I'm not sufficiently familiar with your laws to know."

"Surely we can."

But the assurance of the agents received a rude shock ere they had even reached the dock with the captives!

After Pietro searched the bodies of the two men whom he had caught the night before, without finding

anything of importance, the trio were taken aboard the government tug which headed for the dock.

To the amazement of Barzeff, no sooner had the tug put off from the liner than he and his companions were left alone in the stern.

Determined not to be placed in jail if he could help it—for he realized that it would be the question of only a very short time before some of the agents would identify him, he suddenly vaulted over the low rail of the boat and dropped into the water!

Being a veritable water-dog, he had little difficulty in diving and swimming under water for a sufficient length of time to allow the tug to get several hundred yards away from him and, just as he had made up his mind to head for the shore, he sighted a fishing smack.

To hail it and persuade the fisherman, with the aid of a couple of twenty pound notes, to take him aboard was but the matter of a few minutes and he was soon safe in the bottom of the smack where he remained until evening before being put ashore.

When the agents discovered that one of the prisoners was missing, there was consternation among them and they plied Alexis and Sergius with questions as to the manner of his escape. But so sudden had been Barzeff's disappearance that his fellows actually had not seen it—and the secret service men were forced to content themselves with the idea that the captive preferred suicide to imprisonment and they so reported it.

But within forty-eight hours they were called upon to do some very lively explaining!

In the meantime, all unconscious of the prisoner, the great detective was being borne toward the French port where he arrived in due course.

Amid the bustle and confusion of landing the passengers, it was only with the greatest difficulty that he and his assistant could keep Olga and Frank in sight—but, thanks to their really remarkable powers of shadowing, they finally succeeded in trailing them to a train bound for Switzerland without the pair being conscious that they were being followed.

Unwilling to take seats in the same compartment, they took one entirely to themselves directly next door—but they were not destined to enjoy their privacy for long!

Though Pietro had been able to keep the fact of his identity from the members of the inner circle aboard the liner, the news of his departure had been flashed by cable to the Red Queen's spies throughout Europe—with the result that a beautiful woman was selected to lure him into the clutches of the band that defied the combined secret services of the continent, for the purpose of inflicting punishment mete with the offence the great detective had committed in daring to take up the task of running her to earth!

And while Pietro and Guiseppe were congratulating themselves on their success in trailing Olga and Frank, they were, themselves, being followed!

Not long were the girl and her companion in ignorance as to the true names of the men who had posed

as Lanza and Morodini, however. For, just as the train started, a guard ran up to their compartment, unlocked it and tossed in a bundle of despatches—and when Olga realized that she had been duped by the great detective, she was almost beside herself with rage!

The instructions she received, however, were of such a nature that she could not long dwell upon the disgrace Pietro had inflicted upon her and with a will she set to carrying them out, opening a large bag, packing it carefully and then getting it ready to set off at the next stop of the train.

And when the famous inspector learned the contents of that bag, he was astounded!

Ere he did so, however, he guarded it for hundreds of miles!

As the train drew in at the station, a woman gowned in exquisite clothes, tall and dark, her face shielded by a heavy veil, descended from one of the rear compartments and hastened forward. At the same time, a guard, who had been heavily tipped, opened the door of the section occupied by Olga and Frank, took the bag that was handed him and, waiting for the tall woman, accompanied her to the compartment in which the famous inspector and his assistant were seated.

Surprised at the unlocking of their door, the manhunters were on the point of offering the man a bonus to let them ride by themselves, when the woman lifted her veil, disclosing her wonderful beauty, put her head inside, looked casually at the detectives and then entered.

Amazed to think that a woman of such apparent refinement and birth should care to ride in a compartment alone with two strange men, the manhunters quickly threw their cigars into the receptacles and gathered their wraps and luggage, that she might have as much room as possible.

Placing her bag carefully beside her, whenever the train stopped, the woman glanced about her, nervously.

As the journey continued, she seemed to become more and more anxious. Several times she appeared to be on the point of speaking and finally did, saying:

"I wonder if you gentlemen are willing to assist an unprotected woman?"

So guileless was her manner and so beautiful was her face, that the great detective's chivalry was instantly aroused.

"Most certainly, madam, in so far as we can," he replied.

With a smile of gratitude, the exquisite creature continued:

"I have here in my bag property of the greatest value to me," and then, as though she realized this announcement was indiscreet to make to strangers, she hastily added: "it would not, however, be of worth to anyone else. From your manner and appearance, I can see that you are gentlemen and, as I must trust some one, for an attempt may be made to wrest the bag from my possession at any station, I am going to put myself in your hands."

"Were it not that I fear I should bore you, I would give you an idea of the danger in which I am. Suffice it to say, however, that it is a family affair."

"With this brief statement, may I count upon your assistance, should it be necessary?"

"As I said before, madam, you may," returned the famous inspector.

"Then will you take this bag beside you and let me take yours to keep by me?"

Before her bewitching smile and charm of manner, the usually shrewd detective seemed to fall captive—and he readily consented to the exchange.

Hour after hour they travelled, chatting and reading. As the journey advanced, the beauty seemed to recover her composure more and more and when dusk fell she seemed buoyant.

"If we can only reach Omau without mishap, I shall be safe," she murmured, just as the train slowed down at a station.

But scarcely had the words left her lips, than there was a hasty unlocking of the door and a masked man sprang into the compartment, seized the bag beside the woman and leaped out again so quickly that neither the famous inspector nor his assistant had time to interfere before he was gone!

And when they did get to the door, shouting for the guard, they could see no sign of the thief, and decided he must have taken refuge in the woods that lined the track.

Realizing that pursuit would be vain, even were they not bent on trailing Olga, the manhunters dropped back into their seats.

"It is fortunate that we changed bags, madam," exclaimed Pietro.

"Yes—you see my fears were well founded. Oh, how angry Johann will be when he finds that the bag contains anything but what he expected—yet how shall I ever be able to replace or repay you for the loss of yours?"

"It will not inconvenience me in the least, so pray think no more about it," returned the great detective for, as a matter of fact, beyond his traveling necessities, the bag contained nothing of value as he carried all the photographs, stilettos and papers in his money pouch which he wore suspended about his neck beneath his suit of mail.

"Some day I may be able to show my appreciation," smiled the beauty. "The world is really very small, you know, and we may meet again when we least expect it." And in evident high spirits, the woman sought to make amends for the loss by her brilliance and amiability.

At last, the train drew into the well-lighted station of Omau.

"Here is where we must part," the exquisite creature declared, rising and putting on her wraps as the guard opened the door. "Again let me repeat my heartfelt gratitude for what you have done for me!" And stooping, she took the bag from beside the famous inspector and descended from the car.

But scarcely had she left the compartment than the manhunters saw Olga and Frank pass the one in which they were and enter the depot!

"By Jove! This is where we get off too!" exclaimed Pietro, hurriedly collecting his belongings and leaping to the walk, followed by Guiseppe. "I wonder where the beauty is? So long as this is our destination, for the present, at least, we may be able to assist her more—and I don't mind telling you I should like to know who she is. I never saw such a creature in my life, before!"

But though the great detective had his wish, he rued bitterly the moment in which he made it!

As he and Guiseppe passed through the station, they were greeted by the beauty.

"Isn't it provoking," she exclaimed. "I must drive about ten miles from here and the only carriage has just been taken by two young men. They were even going in the very direction in which I am, yet though I offered to pay the entire charge, they would not consent to allow me to share the carriage with them!"

If any suspicion of his fair companion might have arisen in his mind, her statement that Olga and Frank refused to allow her to accompany them would have dispelled it and again the great detective played the gallant!

"But there must be other vehicles to be procured in this place. As we are going in the same direction, we should be delighted to have you drive with us, if it would give you a feeling of greater security."

"Indeed, it would," murmured the beauty, bestowing another of her ravishing smiles upon the famous inspector. And quickly a vehicle was procured and the three started on their drive.

The road being one of those constructed by the Romans, was as smooth as glass and the carriage rolled along comfortably but so dark was the night that beyond the fact that they were ascending into the mountains, the manhunters could judge little of their surroundings.

Of a sudden, as they were laughing and chatting gaily, there sounded the rush of hoofbeats, then the rattle of rifles and the carriage was surrounded by a score of masked men!

"Brigands!" gasped the beauty—and promptly fainted.

CHAPTER XX.

THE RED QUEEN FULFILLS HER OATH.

At the crack of the guns, Pietro seemed to rouse from the hypnotic spell which the beautiful and mysterious siren had cast upon him—and for the first time it occurred to him that he had been duped by the tale of the woman and lured into the mountains!

And with the cry of one of the supposed brigands, this belief became certainty!

"Where are the fools, Natalia?" the voice shouted.

But before the beauty could answer, the great detective seized his assistant by the arm, threw open the door on the side of the carriage away from the banditti and leaped out into the darkness!

Whether a precipice or level ground would be his landing place, he knew not, nor cared. His one thought was that neither he nor Guiseppe should fall victim to the band of murderers they were hunting—and he preferred to die by his own act, if die he must.

Yet even as he leaped, he realized that the brigands would not attack the carriage on the verge of a precipice lest some of them be pushed over to their death—and the thought was confirmed when his feet touched solid ground.

"Down on your belly!" he gasped in his assistant's ear. "Keep hold of me and crawl for those rocks looming ahead!"

But the famous inspector was forced to abandon his plan for even as he stated it, the banditti, made aware of the escape of their victims by Natalia, lighted flambeaux which they carried attached to their saddles and in their flares, Pietro and Guiseppe were soon discovered.

"There they go—over toward the rocks! Bring them down, boys—but don't kill them! Your Queen wishes to inflict the punishment for their rashness, herself!"

And to this order the manhunters owed their lives!

The instant the great detective heard it, he leaped to his feet and zigzagging and bounding into the air dashed down the road up which they had come.

Zipping through the air, the bullets sped all about them and as the brigands saw that they were unable to bring down the two fleeing men, they became maddened, making their shots all the more wild and finally putting an end to them entirely when some of the horsemen darted in pursuit—for their companions were obliged to stop firing for fear they would kill some of their own men!

As they drew farther and farther out of range, Pietro bade his assistant give up the zigzagging and put all his energy into running naturally—and thanks to their speed, they rounded a curve in the road and hastily scrambled into the protection of some boulders from behind which they watched the banditti gallop past, unseeing.

At the fiasco, Natalia grew furious, shrieking and cursing the men for allowing the great detective to escape after she had succeeded in luring him into their very clutches.

But, at last, quieting down, she ordered the driver to proceed and, accompanied by the disgraced brigands, the way to the fastness of the Red Queen was resumed. And before they reached it, the horsemen who had gone in pursuit of Pietro and Guiseppe joined them.

"What's to be done?" demanded the assistant, after the banditti had repassed them on their return.

"There's no use in trying to capture so many of the fiends by ourselves," declared the famous inspector. "We must return to the village and enlist the aid of the soldiery."

Accordingly, they set out at the top of their speed. But not more than a mile had they gone before, in rounding another curve, they came face to face with a squad of troopers, carrying flambeaux.

"Who goes there?" demanded the officer in command, while his men covered them with their carbines.

Realizing from the tone and appearance that they were members of the canton soldiery, Pietro gave his name.

"Thank heaven! We're in time, then!" exclaimed the officer. And as the troopers lowered their weapons and advanced, the lieutenant soon joined the man-hunters, whom he told that despatches had been received only a short time before stating that the famous inspector was being lured to the lair of the Red Queen and that he must be either rescued or avenged at any cost.

"We've still time to avenge the trick—and capture the arch-fiend who rules the Reds!" smiled the great detective. "How far is it to her hiding place?"

"Surely, you don't intend to give chase after escaping from her clutches once?" gasped the officer, astounded at the suggestion.

"I most certainly do—I haven't trailed some of her select coterie all the way from New York just to turn round and go back because I allowed myself to be tricked!" exclaimed the famous inspector. "Just give me five men who are afraid of nothing and I'll have the whole band before daybreak!"

The earnestness with which Pietro spoke banished the sneer that rose to the lips of the young officer and he replied:

"I should like to be present at the capture of the woman who has defied all Europe. I, myself, will accompany you. If any of my men care to, they may volunteer—I shall not command them."

Plainly did these words show the terror in which the Red Queen was held—and the great detective believed it was largely this fear that she inspired which prevented her from being captured. But he wisely kept his opinion to himself and watched the troopers closely to see if any would offer their services.

For several minutes they whispered together and then three men declared their willingness to participate in the raid.

"How far is it to the lair?" asked the famous inspector, as the volunteers rode forward.

"Not more than a mile."

"Then we'll go afoot. Some one who knows the lay of the land come and walk with me."

Quickly a splendid specimen of manhood ranged himself alongside Pietro and they started ahead when the lieutenant exclaimed:

"The rest of you men wait here. If we do not return within three hours or you hear any firing ride to our support for all you are worth."

Treading as silently as possible, the manhunters approached the fastness of the wonderful woman.

"It's not more than an eighth of a mile to it now," whispered the officer, halting. "What plan of campaign shall we follow?"

Ere the great detective could answer, his guide breathed in his ear:

"I know a secret entrance to the rear of the cave. It's never guarded because only a few are aware of its existence. I found it when a boy, hunting."

"Just the thing," returned the famous inspector and, removing their shoes and boots that not the slightest sound should herald their approach, they advanced, winding in and out at times upon their hands and knees among the rocks.

"Here it is," suddenly whispered the guide—and noiselessly withdrawing a wooden shutter he disclosed an opening which led under what seemed to the great detective to be a platform.

Scarce daring to breathe, lest the pounding of their hearts betray their presence, the seven manhunters glided within the opening and paused. Though they could see only the flare of the lights, they could hear distinctly—and they listened in amazement.

"What have you to say, Olga?" demanded a woman's voice, sternly. "By your thick-headedness, you have brought this devil of a Pietro to our very doors—and the rest of you fools have allowed him to escape. If you can offer any reason, girl, why you should not pay the penalty of our stupidity, speak!"

For a moment, there was silence, then Olga replied:

"I have this to say—and if it is not deemed worthy, I am willing to fulfill my oath."

"It is your blundering, cowardly band here who are to blame for the loss of Pietro. I carried out my assignment. I made Hastings Courtenay fall in love with me! I made him think that I was willing to marry him! I brought him to the house to ask my hand from Barzeff, my supposed father, and you have his head in proof that your mandate was carried out."

"And the fool detective guarded that head himself, the head of the very man whom he was seeking to avenge, losing his own bag in order to protect it!" cried a voice recognized as Natalia's—and at the words, the Red Queen and many of her companions laughed.

"But he should never have been allowed to reach the continent, or even England!" snapped the woman.

"Your agents in New York fuzzled," retorted Olga. "They should have sent me word that Pietro was aboard."

"They did."

"Then *he* received it—not I. That probably explains why he was in the wireless room so much!"

"But how did he manage to elude my agents in New York and Washington?"

"If you knew the devil of a detective as I do, you would not ask. He seems to bear a charmed life! His recent escape from your own retainers proves that!"

"Now, if you consider it was my fault that he is so near you, I will pay the penalty!"

"We will decide later," announced the Queen, with regal solemnity. "Frank, tell us why you should be received by us into the inner circle!"

"Because I procured the head of Hastings Courtenay!"

"You mean you carried out our decree against him?"

"Yes."

'At these words, the great detective started so that he almost betrayed his presence—for of all the possible murderers of the British chief agent, the weak-faced American boy had never occurred to him.

"Why did you do it?" continued the Queen.

"To prove that I would carry out your commands with my life!"

"Well said! My children bow your heads while we deliberate the matter!"

Could the famous inspector and his companions have looked into the assembly room at that moment, they would have seen the score or more of men and women within kneel forward while their sovereign, a magnificent, regal appearing creature clad in brilliant red, leaned her head back against the huge Blue Stiletto which was fashioned into her throne.

Despite his inability to see, however, the great detective believed that the moment had come for him to strike—and putting his lips to the ear of each man, he bade him draw his revolvers or carbines and leap into the throne room, covering the subjects while he, himself, captured the Red Queen.

Waiting until all were ready, he gave the signal to advance.

Like so many jacks-in-the-box, the seven grim-visaged, determined men sprang from beneath the platform!

"Hands up! The first person who moves, dies!" thundered the great detective, then whirled and levelled his pistols at the woman on the curious throne.

So utterly unexpected was the command, that the captives only gasped!

"Descend from that mockery of a throne, you she-devil!" ordered Pietro. "Take your place in the first row where I can keep my eyes on you!"

A moment the outraged Queen hesitated.

Bang! went the famous inspector's pistol—and the stiletto shaped crown fell from her head!

"Make haste—or I'll shoot at *you* next time!" snapped the great detective.

And quickly the woman descended from her throne.

As she did so, one of the brigands raised his head.

"Guiseppé, give that fellow a bullet in the right shoulder!" And as the pistol barked, Pietro added: "When I said not to move I meant it!"

"Lieutenant, pass among the prisoners and bind them hand and foot! No danger will come to you, I'll guarantee that."

Quickly the officer strode forward, approaching the Red Queen first.

But as he extended his hands to seize hers and bind them, the woman hissed:

"No dog of a detective shall take us, who have defied Europe, prisoner. I follow my oath—and die by the Blue Stiletto!"

And as she spoke, the woman plunged the weapon into her heart and pitched to the rocky floor!

Their leader, their brains and their inspiration gone, the other members of the inner circle of the Blue Stiletto lost heart and without difficulty the great detective and his companions bound them and led them for the last time from the fastness of the Red Queen!

CHAPTER XXII.

CONCLUSION.

With his prisoners safe behind the walls of the stone prison in Omau, the great detective spent several days in examining files and records he found in the rocky lair of the Red Queen and, through the facts and lists that he unearthed, the majority of the members of the Society of the Blue Stiletto were arrested and sentenced to various terms of imprisonment.

The misguided Frank Stebbins, Olga, Sergius and Alexis were taken back to New York by the famous inspector where the murderer paid the penalty of his crime and the others received long terms of imprisonment on the ground that they were accessories both before and after the fact.

For a time, every secret agent in the world searched for Barzeff. But, like his Queen, he died by the Blue Stiletto, leaving a note saying that while he was watched too closely to allow him to carry out his assignment, he would never submit to arrest.

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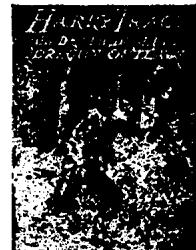
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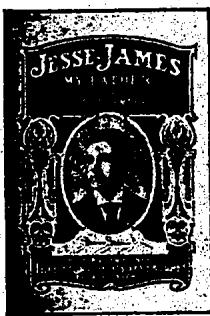
This story describes the descent of the notorious outlaw and his men upon a "boom" mining town of Nevada. As they are encamped in a canyon they are startled by a cry. An investigation leads to an encounter with several ferocious mountain lions and the finding of a woman's corpse. Proceeding to the town, the bandits arrive just in time to prevent the lynching of the husband of the woman, who, it is learned, fled from her home with her baby to escape the advances of the boss of the town, a gambler. Jesse decides to unmask the villain, and in doing so meets with a series of adventures that are thrilling, finally escaping from a snake-infested cave by making a human bridge.

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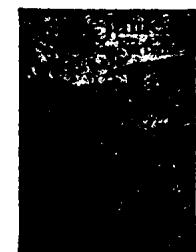
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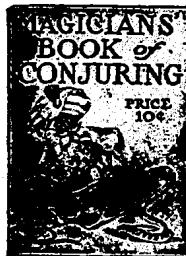
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